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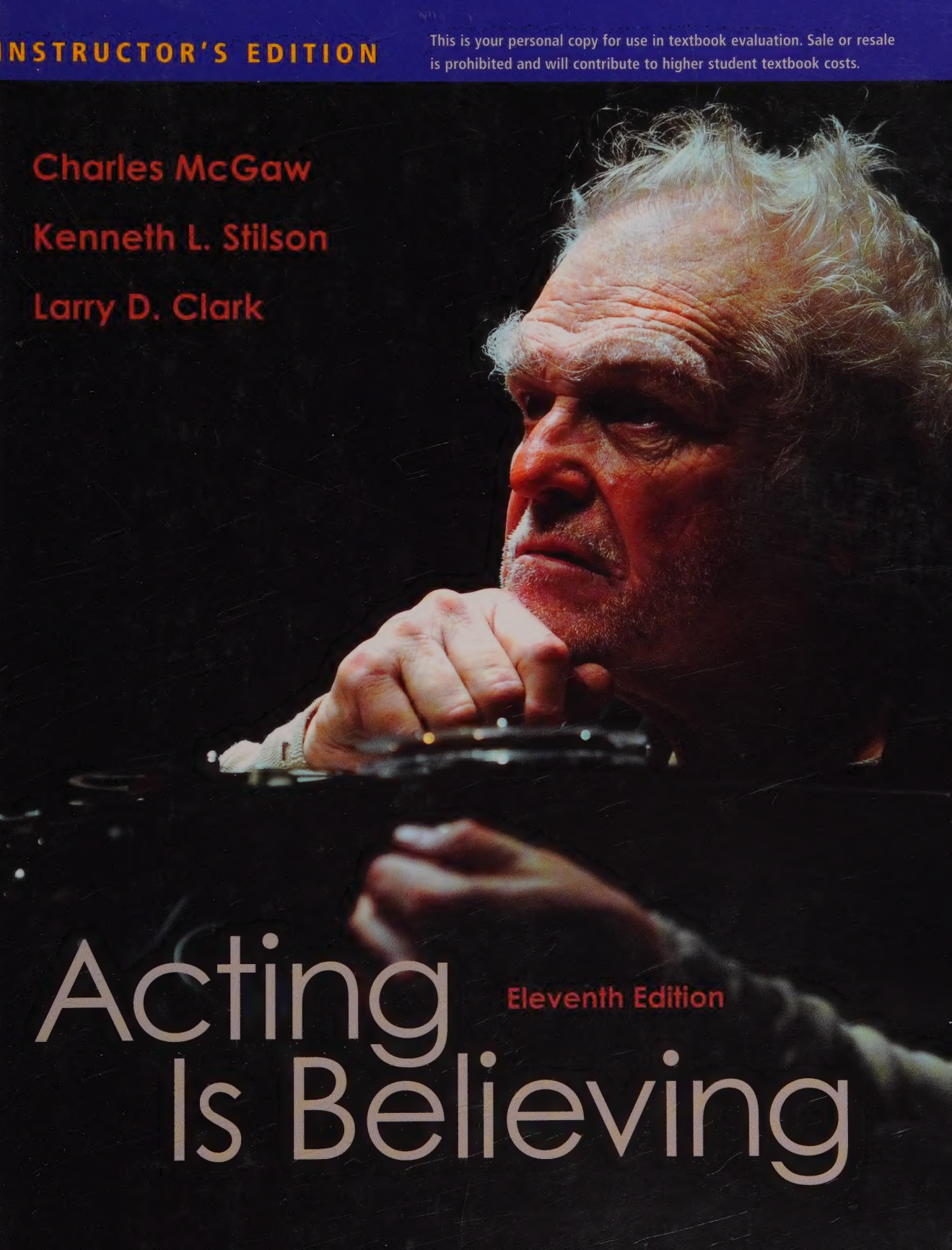
**Charles McGaw**

**Kenneth L. Stilson**

**Larry D. Clark**

# Acting Is Believing

**Eleventh Edition**









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ELEVENTH EDITION

# Acting Is Believing

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**Acting Is Believing, Eleventh Edition**

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Senior Publisher: Lyn Uhl

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Manufacturing Buyer: Justin Palmeiro

Rights Acquisitions Specialist/Text:  
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Cover Image: Brian Dennehy as Erie Smith in  
The Goodman Theatre's production of  
*Hughie*. Directed by Goodman Artistic  
Director, Robert Falls, Photo courtesy of  
The Goodman Theatre, Brian Dennehy, and  
Richard Hein. Photo by Liz Lauren

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2010934030

Student Edition:

ISBN-13: 978-0-495-89807-8

ISBN-10: 0-495-89807-4

**Wadsworth**

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*For Rhonda and Emma*

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# PREFACE

I had read various editions of *Acting Is Believing* before walking into Larry D. Clark's class for the first time in 1985, but I still had only the faintest of ideas on how to summon an inspired performance every evening as if the events onstage were happening for the first time. "Acting is believing," Clark said. Great acting is reliant upon belief in "your" **given circumstances**, belief in "your" physical body, belief in "your" unique personal history and perspective, belief in "your" relationships, and belief in "your" actions.\* Belief. It sounded so simple. In my world, which had been filled with strange and complicated jargon from overly intellectual acting textbooks, the simplicity of this mantra made perfect sense. It was a breath of fresh air. It was magical. All I had to do was believe.

Still I wondered where to find this belief while onstage in an imaginary world, wearing costumes and handling props in front of an audience of strangers. According to Larry Clark, I had to find my belief in another magical word—*if*. The **magic if**. As an actor, I had to transform myself into a new human being living in a fantasy world through belief in this simple word. What would I do *if* I were this person in this unique set of circumstances?

What would I do *if* I were an American soldier in a foreign country pinned down under enemy fire trying to save a household filled with civilians? What *if* there were terrified children in the house crying for help? What *if* Intelligence suspected this area to be littered with IEDs? What *if* "I"

---

\* When creating a role, you should always think in the first person. If you speak of the person you are creating as a character or in the third person, you will automatically be distancing yourself from him and his actions. Thus, when discussing your "character," you should always speak from his or her point of view by referring to yourself as "I." Any time the authors of this book speak from the character's point of view, we use forms of "I" or "we," always placing quotation marks around the word.

had only minutes to act before a torrent of allied bombs rained on this site, destroying everything within a one-block radius? What *if* pieces of shrapnel had punctured “my” left leg, limiting “my” mobility? What *if* it were 110° and “my” gear weighed more than 50 pounds?

This amazing *if* opened a world of possibilities.

The stage is not reality but rather a secondary world. As an actor, I knew the people I created onstage were fiction. The emotions these people experienced were not real, and yet I knew they had to be absolutely truthful given the imaginary circumstances. In playing this American soldier, I thought what *if* “I” were terrified and had only minutes to act. What *if* it were stiflingly hot, and “I” couldn’t breathe? What *if* “I” were exhausted and hurting from “my” wounds, consumed by uncontrollable feelings and internal conflict? Although fiction, I knew “my” emotions and the affect of the internal and external conditions must be truthful.

Great acting requires genuine feelings. In order for my audience to suspend their disbelief while watching this rescue scene unfold, I knew they had to accept my character’s emotions as truthful. Although I was only beginning my serious actor training, on opening night of this play, my portrayal was inspired. I believed. My fellow actors believed. My audience believed. At the next performance, however, I lost my muse, unable to reach the appropriate levels of determination, anxiety, pain, terror, and exhaustion. I had been rehearsing for weeks. I knew what this onstage moment required; yet, I found I could no longer attain my goal of true emotions. I thought, how do I summon at will the unattainable?

To me, repeated emotions were like blowing smoke into the air one day and trying to capture that same smoke the next day in a jar. On opening night, I was focused, my performance inspired. As a serious and dutiful actor, I went home after the show, avoiding the temptation to overindulge at the cast party. Filled with adrenaline, I tried to calm my nerves by watching television. Although I went to bed at a reasonable time, I tossed and turned all evening. I spent the next morning nursing what felt like a hangover, but I had had nothing to drink. Later that day, I received notice that my bank account was overdrawn, and right before coming to the theatre, my girlfriend and I had a fight. I entered the dressing room preoccupied with my own problems. When the curtain rose on the second performance, I simply didn’t feel “it.” I had on the same costume, spoke the same lines to the same actors, but my performance was a mere shadow of my opening night success. I simply didn’t have the technique to recapture the emotional depth required in this scene.

Larry Clark taught me that true emotions in imaginary circumstances could only be found and recreated at will by understanding the full meaning of the simple word that preceded the magical *if*. “What would I *do if*....” Acting is doing. Action is the process or state of acting or being active. He taught me that, as an actor, by fully committing to my actions, I could recapture that “smoke in a jar.” Action was the key ingredient in recreating true emotions at every performance.

With this particular scene, he told me to reconsider my **score of physical actions**. “I” survey the path between “my” barricade and the family’s house to

check for IEDs. “I” scream to “my” buddies for cover fire, as “I” make “my” way to a burned-out jeep in the middle of the dirt road. “I” run as quickly as “I” can, but the pain in “my” left leg is excruciating, causing “me” to greatly favor “my” right leg. “I” squint as “I” look at the sun to see its position relative to the direction of enemy fire. While I’m checking “my” ammunition, “my” rifle jams. “I” curse and throw it on the ground before grabbing “my” revolver and unlocking the safety. “I” notice the gunfire is coming at regular intervals. “I” count to “myself.” “I” shed the excessively heavy protective gear that slows “my” mobility. “I” unscrew “my” canteen and pour water over “my” wounded leg. “I” cry out in pain. “I” clutch “my” rosary and say a quick prayer. “I” yell at the civilians to unlock the front door and clear the immediate area. “I” again yell for cover fire. “I” take several quick breaths and run toward the house.

Actions followed by actions. Repeatable actions lead to truthful emotions that channel your belief. Acting *is* believing.

Over the years, Larry Clark had taught many actors who went on to have hugely successful careers in theatre and film—most notably Tom Berenger and Chris Cooper. In 2002, when he first approached me about assuming the authorship of this classic text, I was both honored and terrified. I was at that time a working actor who had been teaching the craft for more than fifteen years, but I had never given serious thought to writing about what I sermonized on a daily basis. When I told him that I doubted my own abilities to “carry this torch,” he said, “You’re an actor. Talk to them about what you know. Write this book as if you’re working with your own students. Organize it as if you’re preparing a year-long series of classes for students who seriously want to pursue acting as a career. Writing is formalized speech, but you must use language that really resonates with your generation of students. Acting textbooks can be complex, strange, and impenetrable. Your job is to simplify these theories without speaking down to them. Talk to them as young professionals. Give them useable techniques to summon inspired and repeatable performances. Give them practical advice that will help them to launch successful careers in this most impractical of businesses. That’s your job.”

In writing what is now my fourth edition of this textbook, I always try to keep in mind what I learned directly from Larry Clark. I also consider what Charles McGaw, the original author, famously said to his multitude of students, “I don’t believe you.” This simple statement was the primary force behind his 1955 groundbreaking text. “An actor must believe to make his audience believe.”

Based on the teachings of **Constantin Stanislavski**, McGaw’s method of acting was centered on the concepts of action and belief. Over fifty-five years and ten editions later, the formula of discovering true emotions onstage through belief in physical actions remains as relevant as ever. Like Stanislavski, McGaw also understood that having talent wasn’t enough to forge a successful and enduring career in acting. He recognized that natural ability had to be cultivated. Just as a rigorous music teacher drills his most gifted and advanced students in preparation for careers as concert pianists, acting talent must be nurtured and sustained through serious training.

Today, with hundreds of acting programs across the country graduating a multitude of talented young professionals each year, technique training is



more important than ever. In the twenty-first century, acting continues to be one of the world's most glamorous and yet elusive professions. Thousands of actors vie for a limited number of jobs in theatre, film, television, and other forms of multimedia. Competition is fierce. Without training, connections, and a relentless will to succeed, actors cannot hope to survive in this profession—no matter how great their talent.

Between 1955 and 1986, Charles McGaw's brilliant interpretation of *Stanislavski's System* inspired generations of young actors. It endured through four editions, until the authorship was passed to Larry D. Clark, who expertly co-authored the next three editions to meet the demands of actors in the late twentieth century.

Since assuming the authorship of this text in 2002, I have strived to offer advice in a way that remains grounded in Stanislavski's theories as interpreted by my illustrious predecessors, and yet I have been charged with moving this book into the next century. As a professional actor, I grew up with Stanislavski, McGaw, and Clark. I also became a teacher of acting who passionately believes that this system is more alive today than ever. With each edition, I have tried to bring that enthusiasm to a new generation of actors, students who thrive in a world that is faster, tougher, and more aggressive than in previous decades.

It now seems I am always in a state of refining this text, looking for ways to make it better, more relevant. Even before the tenth edition had been released, I began work on the eleventh. On a daily basis, my own year-one acting classes become my laboratory to experiment with new Stanislavski-based exercises and revise long-standing ones. I watch carefully to see whether or not my 18- to 23-year-old students relate to and are energized by an exercise, and those successes and failures are then reflected in my writing.

With the eleventh edition, I have greatly expanded and refined the number of exercises from which acting teachers may select for their classes. Exercises from previous editions have been modified to help keep the text current and significant. I have replaced most of the published monologues and many of the references when clarifying theoretical material. Because today's students are such visual learners, as customary with recent editions of this text, I have updated 75 percent of the photographs and captions.

Although each chapter has been refined and updated, Chapter 2, "Approaching the Creative State," and Chapter 7, "Investigating the Subconscious," demonstrate significant changes in the presentation of content. Chapter 2 maintains many of the former warm-up exercises, but it now focuses more on the breathing and mental exercises of master teacher Keith Davis as part of the nightly transformation process. The theory and approach behind affective memory remains the same, but Chapter 7 has been rewritten and expanded for clarity.

New to this edition, you will have access to three online appendices: "Theatre Web Links," "Suggested Scene Study for Undergraduate Actors," and most importantly, we have reinstated a completely revised and expanded version of "Learning the Lingo." Replacing the former appendix, "Theatre Resources," "Theatre Web Links" is a greatly expanded, state-by-state list of



links to professional publications, unions and organizations, combined audition sites, and the top university-based training programs in the nation. “Suggested Scene Study for Undergraduate Actors” has been extracted and expanded from Chapter 12, “Preparing Undirected Scene Study.” It focuses on strong scenes for actors between the ages of 18 and 23. Replacing “Terms and People to Know,” found at the end of each chapter in the ninth and tenth editions of this text, “Learning the Lingo” is a tool for teachers and a wonderful quick reference guide for students that harks back to the popular chapter found in earlier editions of *Acting Is Believing*. As an online resource, it too has been greatly expanded and categorized into the following categories: “Acting Terminology,” “Lines and Dialogue,” “Character and Script Analysis,” “Stage Types and Areas,” “Stage Directions,” “Body Positions,” “Actors’ Positions in Relation to One Another,” “Stage Movement,” “Specific Types of Theatre Rehearsals,” “Miscellaneous Acting and Theatre Terms,” and “People and Companies to Know.” To access these resources, visit the *Acting Is Believing* companion Web site at HYPERLINK "<http://www.cengage.com/theatre/mcgaw/actingisbelieving11e>" [www.cengage.com/theatre/mcgaw/actingisbelieving11e](http://www.cengage.com/theatre/mcgaw/actingisbelieving11e).

As always, many people have graciously donated their time, energy, and resources to the completion of this eleventh edition. As I have in the last three editions, I first want to thank Dr. Larry D. Clark. He continues to influence my professional life.

My wife, Rhonda, and my daughter, Emma, are the two most important people in my life. Rhonda is also my best friend and colleague, while Emma is my light. They inspire me every day.

I greatly appreciate my publisher, Michael Rosenberg, my editor, Jillian D’Urso, her editorial assistant, Erin Pass, and all their colleagues at Cengage/Wadsworth Learning. I also wish to thank Joseph Malcolm and his colleagues at PreMedia Global, Inc. for their devoted work on this edition. It’s an honor to work with such dedicated professionals.

I wish to thank Judith Farris, an extraordinary and renowned musical theatre voice teacher, who has helped me further define my own acting technique through her teaching of the Keith Davis technique, which has had a significant effect on my revision of Chapter 2. I greatly appreciate the work of my student research assistants, Lindsay Prawitz and Kyle VanPool, as well as the constant feedback from my students in acting classes and productions. I also want to thank Rob Dillon, Amy Fritsche, and my professional colleagues for their ongoing reactions and criticisms. Reviewers for this edition included Ric Goodwin, Ashland University; Steve Berglund, Central Michigan University; and John Staniunas, University of Kansas.

For their considerate help with gathering and securing the rights for their beautiful photos, I also want to thank: Carly Leviton, Publicity Associate, Liz Lauren, Denise Schneider, Julie Massey, and Robert Fall, The Goodman Theatre; Ca MacLean, Department Head/Artistic Director, and Bill Black, Associate Head of Theatre, University of Tennessee and The Clarence Brown Theatre; Madeline Puzo, Dean, and Marcus Gualberto, Communications Assistant, School of Theatre, University of Southern California; Richard Rand,

Chair, and David Legeveen, Marketing Director, Department of Theatre, Purdue University; Cameron Jackson, Chair, School of Theatre, Florida State University; Catherine McNeela, Head, Musical Theatre, Department of Theatre, Elon University; Amanda Caraway and Bruce Lee, Publications Director, Utah Shakespearean Festival; Darcie R. Shinberger, Director of University Relations/Visual Production Center and Western Illinois University's Department of Theatre; Glynn Brannan, Director of Public Relations and Graphic Design, and Virginia Commonwealth University's Department of Theatre; Kurt Heinlein and the Department of Theatre and Dance at Missouri State University; Ashton Byrum and Mark Lyons, Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, Musical Theatre Program; John Poole, Chair, and Pete Guither, Principal Photographer, School of Theatre and Illinois Shakespeare Festival, Illinois State University; Rick Engler, Director of Marketing, and The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey; Judith Midyett Pender, Director of Acting, and The University of Oklahoma's Department of Theatre; Paula S. Newsome, Director of Marketing and Development, School of Theatre Arts, the University of Arizona; and Alice Rainey-Berry, Director of Publicity and Promotion, and the University of Memphis' Department of Theatre and Dance.

A New York-bound student of mine, Audrey Stanfield, who recently completed the Uta Hagen Acting Intensive at HB Studio, gave me the following passage. Words of inspiration from Martha Graham to Agnes de Mille describing the magic we as artists create onstage, it was given to Audrey by one of her HB instructors. Ms. Graham's words seem an appropriate conclusion to this preface:

There is a vitality, a life force, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium; and be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is, nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open.... You have to keep open and aware directly to the urges that motivate you. Keep the channel open. No artist is pleased. There is no satisfaction whatever at any time. There is only a queer, divine dissatisfaction, a blessed unrest that keeps us marching and makes us more alive than the others."

*Kenneth L. Stilson  
Cape Girardeau, Missouri  
October 29, 2010*

# Training Your Talent

*“Acting is the life of the human soul receiving its birth through art.”*

**Richard Boleslavsky**

Acting is believing: what a simple definition for arguably the most complex of all arts—giving birth to an imaginary character. As an actor, you must hone your ability to believe in everything that takes place onstage. You must believe in your every action within the existence of your invented circumstances. You can only fully believe in the truth; therefore, you must know how to find it at all times in your character, this fictitious person that has sprung to life through you. But if everything onstage is nothing more than invention—a lie—how can you find truth there? The stage is filled with mere imitations of life—painted scenery, artificial furs, faux jewelry, makeup, costumes, stage lighting, blunted swords, and plastic crowns. All lies. How can you *believe* where no truth exists?

According to Constantin Stanislavski, whose theories have influenced every generation of actors since the early twentieth century, “There are two kinds of truth and sense of belief in what you are doing. First, there is the one that is created automatically and on the plane of actual fact, and second, there is the scenic type, which is equally truthful but which originates on the plane of imaginative and artistic fiction.” Factual truth loses relevance. You must seek “scenic” truth, an emotional or inner truth. It is the kind of truth that comes from deep within your being and surges through your body to find outward expression. With every human being you create, you must find truth in “your” memories, images, and emotions, because it defines “your” relationship with every person, thing, and event in this new reality.

“Truth cannot be separated from belief, or belief from truth,” wrote Stanislavski. Truth and belief cannot exist without each other, and you must have both to create and truly live your part. You must fully commit to everything that happens onstage, just as you must fully connect with your partners, both onstage and in the auditorium. Your behavior must inspire those watching to momentarily accept that the people and events onstage are real. They must recognize the possibility that these events could actually happen, allowing them to experience emotions analogous to those being experienced onstage by you, the actor. Each and every moment must be saturated with a belief in the truthfulness of your actions and emotions.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, you must realize that everything around you onstage is false. You are not really the crown prince of Denmark living in the tenth century seeking revenge for the murder of your father. You are not really living in the 1930s and standing on a balcony of the French Riviera with your new husband in a condominium adjacent to his ex-wife’s. You know you are really wearing costumes and makeup. You never completely lose yourself in your part. You know you are engaged in scripted dialogue, performing a sequence of rehearsed actions working opposite fellow actors. You feel thousands of watts of light flooding down on you. You are aware of the stage manager, backstage crew, and the actors waiting in the wings. You know you are standing before an audience. You are even aware of noises and events occurring outside the theatre—planes going overhead, cars honking, rain hitting the roof, and so on. You would have to be mentally imbalanced to lose your awareness of your real self and the factual things around you. However, as an actor giving birth to a new human being in a completely fabricated “secondary” reality, you must enter into that magical world of “if.” *If* these clothes on my back were real, *if* this space actually existed at this particular time, *if* I were this person with this distinct personal history who had these perceptions, biases, desires, fears, and relationships, this is what “I” would say. This is what “I” would do.

Only reality exists. You cannot help but believe in the truth of reality. With the help of Stanislavski’s **Magic If**, however, you can **suspend your disbelief** and enter into this new world with greater enthusiasm than you believe in your own reality. Believing in the world of *if* allows you to part from your own plane of truth and enter into your secondary reality as a new person. You simply cannot create a truthful human being without *if*.

As an actor, you are searching for truthful behavior within the **given circumstances** or unchangeable facts of the play. Each script, however, redefines reality. Different levels of truth exist in every production. Some worlds closely resemble our own; they “hold a mirror up to nature.” In other worlds, however, people may break into song and dance, speak in verse, or live an existential life following a nuclear holocaust. It is your responsibility to understand the reality of your character’s circumstances and then behave with absolute truth.

Of significance to an actor is what Stanislavski called the “reality of the inner life of a human spirit.” You will be seeking the inner spiritual world of an imaginary person with your own resources. As an actor, you face the



Photo by Karl Hugh. Copyright Utah Shakespearean Festival



**FIGURE 1.1**

Brian Vaughn as Cyrano de Bergerac in the Utah Shakespearean Festival's 2008 production of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. With help from the "magic if," actors suspend their disbelief and enter into the world of the play with greater enthusiasm than they believe in their own reality.

daunting task of building a three-dimensional being who may be your polar opposite in every conceivable issue. How do you portray a young female runaway who is hooked on crack and has turned to prostitution? How do you justify the actions of a violent alcoholic who beats his wife? How do you play a young nun who has fallen in love with a priest? Where do you find the reality of a young Jewish girl trapped in an upstairs apartment surrounded by the atrocities spawned by the rise of Adolph Hitler? For that matter, how do you enter the mind of a notorious dictator? Regardless of how deranged, loving, eccentric, drugged, spiritual, hateful, or naïve your character, you must never judge them. You must never approach your creation from the third person, passing a verdict on his moral, social, religious, and political beliefs and behaviors. If you do, you will never sustain conviction in your actions onstage. Not everyone holds your personal viewpoints—the same holds true for your characters. All people justify their thoughts and actions. An abortion clinic bomber doesn't see himself as immoral; rather, he justifies his actions as doing the work of God. Part of the craft of creating a new person means looking at the world of the play through his eyes, wearing his clothing, and walking in his shoes.

Although this imagined character will have a completely different inner and outer existence from your own, you must find your work of art by stirring your own inner life, because each new person you create must spring from your own being. Each portrayal is a unique creation derived from three sources: the given circumstances, your imagination, and your personal history, including everything you have experienced, felt, read, or observed in life or fiction. For each creation, you must touch a different wellspring from within your lifetime of emotions and experiences. You are your own instrument. Pianists have their pianos. Painters have their canvases. But actors have only their own bodies and spirits. Unlike artists in other fields, you are the creator, the material, and the instrument, all in one.

Throughout Stanislavski's life and career, he watched in awe as many great actors of his time brought to life night after night the most complex characters ever conceived. And perhaps more astonishing to him, it was as if these stage events were happening for the first time. Were these actors merely inspired to greatness? From where did their creations come? How did these actors know what would happen next when their characters did not know? Stanislavski became obsessed with discovering this **mystery of inspiration**. Is great acting limited only to those who are gifted enough to summon inspiration on demand? What of those would-be actors who are occasionally inspired but haven't the ability to beckon it with each subsequent performance? Are there no technical means for the creation of art, the "craft of creation," so this inspiration may appear more often than not?

Creating inspiration merely by artificial means is impossible. Rather, Stanislavski created a favorable condition for the appearance of inspiration by means of the will. He produced a positive environment for the inception of artistic stimulation during the creation and performance of a role. For stage characterization and behavior that appeared as spontaneously and naturally as in real life, he designed a "system" of actor training that is as relevant to today's actors trying to establish a career onstage, in film, or in television as it was to actors one hundred years ago.

Some people may ask if a training system for the creation of characters can actually exist. Can so-called laws be founded for all time? The answer is yes. For example, a proven link exists between the relationship of your psychological inner self and your physiological body. This law exists for all eternity and can be used in the actor's artistic process. Such laws are completely conscious, tried by science, and binding on everyone. In his book, *My Life in Art*, Stanislavski stated that each actor must know them and "dare not excuse himself because of his ignorance of these laws, 'which are created by nature herself.'" For you, the actor, these laws exist for the purpose of stimulating your inner emotions and a "super-conscious region of creativeness," which is an area outside our comprehension. Yet, after we reach this creative state, it affects all our conscious decision making. It is a place where inspiration rules, a miraculous mental and physical state without which no true art can exist. Therefore, the purpose of your acting training serves one objective. It is a *conscious means through which to enter the super-conscious region of creativeness*. It is the key to unlocking the elusive mystery of inspiration that can be repeated at each and every performance.



Photo courtesy of The University of Oklahoma School of Drama

### FIGURE 1.2

Mary Anthony in a scene from The University of Oklahoma School of Drama's production of *Pride and Prejudice*. Directed by Judith Pender; costume design by Chris Harris; lighting design by Eric Stehl. Inspiration that can be repeated at every performance comes through technique training, a system of acting that provides a conscious means through which to enter the super-conscious region of creativeness.

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If your goal is to perform consistently at a level of professional competence, you need thorough and demanding training in a reliable technique—whether you are performing the works of Anton Chekhov, August Wilson, Stephen Sondheim, Bertolt Brecht, or William Shakespeare.



Like musicians and dancers, actors must master their art in small steps. Stanislavski said the most dangerous dilettante is the one who denies the need for technique and insists it interferes with inspiration. Performing a significant role requires both talent and technical skills fully as great as those necessary for a professional pianist to perform a major concerto. This talent can be developed and these skills acquired only through proper training. In today's highly competitive world, such training will play a vital role in your success in this business. Years ago, actors had no formal instruction; however, today you must train to prepare yourself for a successful career in this field. Unless you are related to powerful individuals in the entertainment industry or people who have connections with or influence over those groups, the odds of launching a career without training are remote. And even then, without extraordinary talent, your career will be limited.

Prior to the flood of training programs across the country, fledgling actors received their theatrical education by working as walk-ons and bit players in stock companies or by touring with road shows, learning their skills through experience. Stories abound of actors discovered in drugstores and young aspirants who descended on Broadway or Hollywood and found fame and fortune merely on the basis of their charm, physical attractiveness, or unique personality. Those days are over. Stock companies have practically disappeared. The number of touring shows has been reduced greatly, and employment with those that remain is certainly not available to untrained actors.

Today, stage, film, television, and even CDs afford you an extremely competitive market, in which thorough training is necessary for even moderate success. For the first time in history, most of our professional actors at least begin their training in a college, university, or conservatory. Furthermore, your best opportunities today are often in small professional or regional theatres, which usually offer a mixed repertory of classics, modern plays, and musicals that require range and versatility. In the past several decades, the growth of these theatres, along with the rise of alternative theatres, children's theatres, theatres associated with colleges and universities, conservatories, and community theatres has given both actors and playwrights many opportunities to practice their profession away from the boom-or-bust syndrome of Broadway and from the major production centers for TV and film.

Even so, it is still commonplace for acting teachers to announce to their students that "there are no jobs" in acting. True, professional union actors earn, on average, less than \$13,000 a year (and included in that average are a significant number of actors who make millions of dollars annually!). Out of more than 100,000 professional actors in the United States, less than 50 percent earn an income higher than the national poverty level in any given year, and less than 10 percent of those actors consistently earn a middle-class income.<sup>2</sup> Acting is one of the most deceptively difficult art forms and one of the most difficult careers in which to make a living. Nevertheless, the best acting students are those who are so irrepressibly committed to this ephemeral and often heartbreaking profession that they persist in trying it against all odds.



## ACTING WITH PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE

The successful stage performance is a carefully planned feat of artistry that effectively communicates a viable interpretation of a play's meaning to an audience. Rather than a casual world in which actors behave impulsively in chance events, the stage is a world of controlled design in which all parts of the pattern serve to illuminate a vision, usually that of a playwright as interpreted by a director. Of course, improvisation and discoveries are an exciting and extremely important part of the process that we will talk about later. But, from the beginning, you must realize acting is not doing simply what “feels natural.” Spontaneous responses are most valid (and most likely to appear) only after careful groundwork. Preparation spawns inspiration.

Like Stanislavski, legendary acting theorists have for decades attempted to harness these sparks or flashes of genius. There are endless examples of actors who are brilliant on opening night and then fail to achieve any semblance of this initial insight in subsequent performances. True inspiration must not be an opening night discovery. “Drama is absolutely and elaborately ‘scored,’ and the greatest acting contains a minimum of spontaneous invention and a maximum of carefully calculated effects repeated with only minute variations at every performance of the same part,” wrote Tyrone Guthrie, one of the most eminent twentieth-century directors in a 1966 *New York Times* article. “Dramatic performance, therefore, is concerned with repeating a series of intelligibly prescribed actions in order to form an intelligibly prescribed design.”

All we have said thus far makes acting seem to be incredibly complex and demanding, and indeed it is. Nevertheless, in addition to the proper motivation to succeed, we can state the essential qualities of a successful actor quite simply as the *two t's*: talent and training.

**Talent** lies deep within your core, and sometimes it is extremely difficult to capture from its hiding place. Talking about talent is easy, but defining it precisely is extremely difficult. Talent is relevant to the observer. Certainly, a “stage mother” and a casting director have two different opinions with regard to talent. Even to a trained professional, however, it frequently seems to be unrecognizable in its undeveloped state. Biographies of many actors of great prominence tell how they were advised early in their careers to consider another profession. Certainly, talent must not be confused with being stage-struck or “screenstruck.” Many such people lack the requisite talent and are attracted to the profession only by the most superficial elements of show business.

Perhaps the best way to define talent is to delineate the personal traits of successful actors. They have an aura—also referred to as personal magnetism, stage presence, star quality, and the unspoken television rating system known as TVQ that makes people want to watch and listen to their every action and thought. Working actors exude confidence and control over their own personality. They have an awareness and readiness to accept their own inner and outer selves. They have expressive bodies and voices and a desire and

need to share experiences with others. Professional actors have sensitivity to the world at large and a curiosity and understanding about diverse people's modes of behavior and the human condition. They radiate courage and self-confidence and are unafraid to reveal their inmost feelings on a public stage.

If you possess these attributes, you will probably be considered talented. You will probably be cast in major roles that test your abilities on a regular basis at your university or community theatre. Although your technique has yet to be fully developed and you lack experience, your talent will probably be recognized at an early age. No one can give you talent. You either have it or you don't. Without it, however, you will face an uphill and perhaps insurmountable battle.

Some people claim that talented actors do not need **training**, the second "t." "Great actors are born!" However, painters, musicians, and dancers must also be born with talent, and yet do any of these other visual or performing artists achieve greatness through talent alone? Laws certainly do not govern extraordinary talent, but it is unlikely you will ever hear a working actor say that technique is unnecessary. In fact, it is quite the opposite; the greater your talent, the more development and technique you will need. Technique must be applied to talent. Not everyone who studies the piano will learn to play music. By the same token, not everyone who studies dance will become a prima ballerina, and not everyone who explores acting will become an actor. You may study technique for many years, but that in no way guarantees that your work will be considered outstanding. On the other hand, talent that goes untrained will never reach its full potential. Concert pianists rehearse scales every day of their lives. Prima ballerinas spend hours at the barre each day working all the muscles of their bodies. Painters, creative writers, and sculptors practice their art seven days a week. It is your responsibility as an actor to train and develop your talent on a daily basis—especially when you are not in rehearsal. Too many so-called actors sit idly between "gigs" doing nothing but speaking of their art. Once cast, they expect inspiration to magically appear. All art demands virtuosity, and virtuosity demands regular training. In book after book, biography after biography, this simple fact becomes abundantly clear: Good actors work hard, train hard, and take their work seriously. They know artistic achievement can come only after practicing their technique so frequently and so thoroughly that it becomes a natural part of everything they do.

Training requires time, patience, hard work, and self-discipline. Enthusiasm, a striving for perfection (although it can never be achieved), and a willingness to work cooperatively with others are all important. In fact, as necessary as abundant talent is to your chance for success, it can be a trap in the early stages of development if it tempts you to get along with minimum effort. Before you know it, persons of lesser talent but with uncompromising discipline and a better attitude will be accomplishing more. You must take complete control of your art through your discipline. Otherwise, you will become no more than a talented proletarian actor, what the legendary actress and teacher, **Uta Hagen**, referred to as a "hack." You will soon be disappointed and discouraged. Talent

by itself is a waste, but a talented actor with a strong work ethic has the potential to become an extraordinary artist.

No one technique will work for every actor, and technique training, regardless of which method you study, can be divided into seven parts: *mind*, *body*, *voice*, *auditioning*, *rehearsal technique*, *performance skills*, and *self-assessment*.

1. **Mind.** Internal training begins with cultural development, an important and inadequately emphasized aspect of the training process. As an artist, you must be a student of life. A broad education in the liberal arts is essential—no matter where you study. The material from which you draw is the entire realm of human knowledge and experience. You cannot afford to be ignorant of historical or contemporary events, linguistics, literature, music, visual arts, design, psychology, sociology, religion, politics, sports, economics, travel, business, circus arts, eroticism, and so on. The list is endless. “An artist who has not mastered his profession is a diletante,” wrote Goethe, “and an artist who has limited himself to his profession is a corpse.” Another part of your internal training involves a keen understanding of human psychology, **historical imagination**, and learning how to control and to make effective use of sensory and emotional responses. Your internal acting training also includes learning to read a script, examine the plot, explore your character and his relationships, break the dialogue into small structural units, determine the simple objectives (by way of **action verbs**) and obstacles (both physical and psychological), unearth the subtext of the verbal and physical actions, and determine the **through line of action**, the chain of consecutive simple objectives, all of which lead to the discovery of the character’s super-objective within the play as a whole.
2. **Body.** External training includes the development of your entire physical apparatus. Not only must you train in dance, combat, fencing, athletics, and so on, but also you must learn that your body—through alignment, gestures, and movement—is one of your principal tools through which to create a character. You must train your body to be a responsive and expressive instrument with the ability to embody your character’s inner thoughts, desires, and fears. Your body is your only real means by which to create a physical form that gives comprehensible meaning to others and has intrinsic artistic value. Body training also includes learning to endow your characters with an appropriate dimension, energy, and clarity that can communicate the meaning to an audience of a certain size occupying a certain space.
3. **Voice.** Vocal training, which may or may not include musical training, develops your oral dexterity as a speaker and involves detailed work in diction, rhythm, tempo, resonance, projection, pitch, inflection, and dialects. Like your physical body, your voice is another primary means to externalize your character’s inner life. As an actor, you must be able to speak your lines with clarity of thought and purpose through the eyes of your character. To fully explore the subtext of each thought, you must





Photo courtesy of Elon University Department of Performing Arts

**FIGURE 1.3**

Paul Miller in Elon University Department of Performing Arts' production of *Kiss Me, Kate*. Directed by Catherine McNeela; costume design by Jack Smith; lighting design by William Webb; scenic design by David Minkoff. All actors must continue to hone their external skills throughout their lives, and serious acting training must involve movement, improvisation, combat, and dance.

acquire the skill and habit of putting the greatest possible meaning into every word you speak.

4. **Auditioning.** Whatever else acting might be, it is a business—a very cold and heartless business. Although you may—and perhaps should—be getting cast on a regular basis as a student, the world of professional acting is extraordinarily competitive. While you may be one of two or three leading ladies at your university, in the “real world” there always seems to be someone else who is taller, shorter, blonder, thinner, fatter, more or less ethnic, and so on. The person in line next to you will be able to sing a higher note, handle more complex dance choreography, or manage Shakespearean verse better than you. Beautiful and distinctive people, who are equally talented and equally well trained, will surround you. You may feel overwhelmed, insignificant, and even depressed by your lack of connections. You may find it extremely difficult to juggle your “regular” job, to keep your head above water financially, while simultaneously staying active in the audition circuit. Professional acting is a business of rejection. The odds are always against you. For every fifty auditions you attend, you may receive one offer. Even established



professionals—unless you are Brad Pitt, Denzel Washington, or George Clooney—must frequently face rejection by producers and casting directors. And after you have secured a job, you must start the process all over again—even before your current job has ended.

A hunger to succeed isn't enough. Ambition alone will not land you a **callback**. Being discovered is a myth. You must have the tenacity and confidence to handle rejection on a daily basis. You must be able to present yourself in a professional manner and sell your talent in an extremely tight job market. Thus, audition training includes the capacity to build and manage a professional Web site, prepare marketable headshots, résumés, business cards, postcards, thank-you notes, and various audition materials, as well as the communication skills to handle yourself in callback or interview situations.

5. **Rehearsal Technique.** Most actors do not know how to rehearse. Some actors know how to rehearse but are too lazy to put in the requisite work needed to fully develop a three-dimensional character. First, you must know how to prepare for rehearsals at home. Research and script analysis skills, which infuse your observations and past experiences with your imagination, are prerequisites when preparing to enter the rehearsal process. After that, you must become skilled at experimentation, making discoveries and learning from failure. You must know how to explore various rhythms and how to commune with yourself, the environment, your images, the text, and your partners. You must also possess the learned skills of working with the director, the stage manager, and the production staff, and you must understand and observe the principles of rehearsal ethics and discipline.
6. **Performance Skills.** Performance technique comes through in-class exercises, scene study, and actual experiences. Following your ability to invent and refine your creation throughout the rehearsal process, you must learn how to perfect your craft by developing advanced performance skills. While in rehearsal, you worked intensively on connecting with your fellow actors. Once in performance, however, you must also learn to establish communion with your offstage partners.

If onstage, “you” are by “yourself” in the woods or unaccompanied in “your” house, “you” are not truly alone. You, as an actor in live theatre, always have an offstage partner. Of course, most people would refer to this group as the *audience*; however, this word should be stricken from your acting vocabulary. You must think of those sitting in the auditorium as your partners with whom “you” share secrets. Like your onstage partners, you must specifically define those people sitting in the house in relation to “your” circumstances.

In *Hamlet*, the actor playing the title role appears onstage by himself numerous times disclosing his innermost thoughts through a series of **soliloquies**, dramatic devices defined as an utterance or discourse by a person who is talking to himself. Since there is no one onstage to hear his stream-of-conscious thoughts as he works through his problems, the untrained actor will instinctively turn these soliloquies inward, talking to

self, thus building a metaphorical wall between himself and his “audience.” Technique training teaches you to define your offstage partners and make them active participants. In this case, those people in the house collectively become Hamlet’s most intimate friend, with whom he shares his deepest thoughts.

By thinking of those who are watching as an audience, you automatically distance yourself from them. This so-called **fourth wall** is a derogatory term that destroys any chance of developing true communion between you and your most important partner in live theatre. By working off those sitting in the house, you are not pandering to them. Rather, you are simply engaging them in the onstage events by making them cohorts. Sometimes, as in Shakespeare, you focus directly into the auditorium as you speak. In other types of plays, your focus remains onstage or using offstage focal points by way of the **fourth side**, which will be fully explored in later chapters. Regardless, you must clearly define your partners in the house and work off them at all times. When singing a solo in a musical, they collectively might be “your” lover, “your” closest friend, “your” parent, “your” priest, “your” enemy, “your” psychiatrist, and so on. “You” focus straightforwardly into the house, sometimes looking directly into their combined eyes. In a play closer to reality, you work off them in more subconscious ways. This is one of the paradoxes of acting, what Stanislavski referred to as **public solitude**, being alone in public. You feel their presence. You feed from their energy. You hear their laughter. You breathe with them and share their silences. The connection is more indirect, but it is every bit as crucial to the success or failure of this shared encounter. Most theorists believe this invisible collective experience, the communion that happens between the actor and audience, is “where theatre happens,” and this skill is paramount to your performance technique training.

Thus, in developing your performance skills, you learn to make those people in the house your active partners. However, performance technique also provides you with the skills to maintain and control “your” impulses, energy, and various **tempo-rhythms**. Finally, they teach you how to focus your stage energy and how to capture and repeat an inspired portrayal as *if* you were living these fictional events for the first time each time you put on “your” clothing.

7. **Self-Assessment.** Stanislavski warned, “Young actor, fear your admirers!” After you enter the magic circle of self-deception, it is difficult to escape the mendacity. It is pleasant to hear the flattery and praise of your adoring admirers because you desperately want to believe them. However, you should not enter into this profession simply to amuse your followers, and do not discuss your artistic process with anyone other than trusted mentors and colleagues. The naïve compliments of friends and family—who are not actors—will not help you grow as an artist. Talk to your admirers, but listen, understand, and even love the observations of a true professional. There is nothing more beneficial to your growth than the brutally honest words of someone who knows. Unfortunately, however, you will not always be lucky enough to have an acting coach who knows

or cares standing over your shoulder giving you expert advice. Therefore, you must know how to objectively observe your own work.

Self-assessment is a learned skill. Beginning with your first acting class, you must make honest appraisals of your own work. You cannot be totally reliant upon any one person, always seeking their approval for your choices and discoveries. One of your teacher's primary responsibilities is to train you to become self-reliant—to serve as your own critic. In the commercial world of theatre, film, and television, directors expect you to deliver a product. They are not your teachers. They will not hire your potential; rather, they contract your skills. Therefore, you must be experienced and honest enough to continue your own growth and development as an artist after you leave the security of the classroom. And although the general public may be satisfied with your work, you must objectively look at your own creation, assessing your choices and continually working on weaknesses. You must believe that inner reward is better than applause.

With the exception of cultural development, which must come as a lifelong commitment to expanding your knowledge of and sensitivity to the world around you, these processes roughly constitute the information presented in this book. You must be cautious, though, about thinking of acting as a step-by-step, logical process. Professional actors never stop honing their abilities in all these areas. You should always bring the skills and understandings of previous lessons to bear on your current exercise. With each assignment, you should explore and practice in a way that continually expands your skills. The ability to perform at a professional level is accumulated over time. You must never cease to study and practice your basic training, just as accomplished musicians devote a tremendous portion of every day to practicing scales.

However talented or tenacious your desire to succeed, technique training cannot be accomplished simply from studying this or any other book. It requires the guidance of able teachers, coaches, and directors. Because theatre is a highly cooperative endeavor, working with others in exercises and in scene study is essential. After acquiring the basic skills, you should be given an opportunity to work before an audience, preferably first in a laboratory situation and later under conditions that approximate professional theatre.

Much of this book is based on a twenty-first century interpretation of Stanislavski's System. "As a seeker for gold, I can transmit to future generations not my searching and my privations, my joys and disappointments, but the precious 'mine' that I found," proclaimed Stanislavski. "This 'mine' in my artistic field is the result of my whole life's work. It is my so-called 'System,' the technique that permits the actor to create a character, to reveal the life of a human spirit, and to incarnate it naturally onstage in an artistic form."<sup>3</sup> Stanislavski's approach is based on laws of the organic nature of an actor. Almost everything in his "System" was developed naturally throughout his long career, and it has survived the test of time over the past one hundred years. Once mastered, technique training provides you with a means for



keeping your performance fresh. With proper technique, your work will not grow stale, no matter how long the run. When these actions are harmoniously and artfully integrated, they help reveal the purpose of the play as interpreted for a particular production. Only then can acting be said to be “good,” no matter how “beautiful” it may have looked or sounded or how “exciting” the event itself may have been to an audience. Only then will “acting” and “believing” become synonymous.

What part should a textbook play in the complex task of training an actor? It should organize your study in a logical progression; it should create an awareness of recurring problems and suggest solutions, thus guiding you toward technical proficiency; and it should provide you with useful practice exercises. No text can be comprehensive; this one, without ignoring any aspect of your overall training, focuses on the psychophysical process through the development of your body, mind, and voice.

## EXPLORING YOUR RESOURCES

This book proceeds from the fundamental belief that student actors begin their training with self-exploration. The tools you will use as an actor, although they may be sharpened by practice and stretched by learning and exercise, are present within you even as you read these words.

The need for you to develop a well-trained body and voice—which we will refer to as your **external resources**—should be obvious. A musician forced to perform on an inferior instrument is at a disadvantage. And you will have a similar disadvantage if you lack muscular and vocal control. In fact, the training of the actor’s voice and body as an instrument occupied the almost exclusive attention of acting teachers well into the twentieth century.

Today’s theatre practice also demands this external training be accomplished in conjunction with other studies and exercises fundamental to your development. A fine speaking voice and a well-coordinated body do not make an actor, any more than possessing a Stradivarius makes a violinist. Your primary task is to create a character who “behaves logically in imaginary circumstances,” and truthful behavior begins deep inside your being and is externalized through your body and voice. Thus, your body, mind, and voice will join through this psychophysical process as the fundamental basis for the study of acting.

The need for internal truth surfaces the moment you start to think seriously about performing a role in a play. Suppose you have been cast in a part that requires you to portray a person who lives in a different time and within a culture that is completely foreign to your experience. For example, you are playing a young Russian princess in fear for your life just prior to the Bolshevik Revolution. If you are like most untrained actors, you will go to your first rehearsal without any ideas about what to do when you get there. Stanislavski’s great student, Yevgeny Vakhtangov, always began by asking his own students, “If I were this human being, how would I change myself?” For the actor playing the Russian princess, she must ask herself these same types of questions. Who are the Bolsheviks? Where do they come





Photo by Kenneth L. Stilson

**FIGURE 1.4**

Phil Newman and JoJo Ramos in Southeast Missouri State University's production of *Little Shop of Horrors*. Directed by Kenneth L. Stilson; choreographed by Hilary Peterson; costume design by Rhonda Weller-Stilson; lighting design by Phil Nacy; scenic design by Jeffrey Luetkenhaus. The actor's primary task is to create a new human being who behaves logically in imaginary circumstances, even when that includes a man-eating plant from outer space.

from? What was “my” life like before their arrival? What is “my” relationship to them? Why do they hate “me”? Before rehearsals have begun, you should have asked a thousand questions about “yourself.” Who am “I”? How do “I” perceive “myself”? What are “my” desires, “my” fears, and “my” points of view about the world? Without in-depth answers to all your questions, how could you possibly perform or even imagine truthful actions for your portrayal of this young royal? The process begins the moment you are cast, and the comprehensive answers will come only after an arduous journey—filled with exploration, discoveries, and failures—in which you systematically discover what you have in your historical imagination that might help bring your portrayal of this princess to life on the stage.

You have now encountered the world of the actor in rehearsal. All actors face the same dilemma when they prepare to perform a role in any play, no

matter how common or how foreign the situation and setting. Your goal as a student of acting is to bring to rehearsal a method of studying a role that will enable you to access the necessary raw materials for creating and performing it. These raw materials, simply put, constitute the accumulation of your own knowledge and are composed of everything you have experienced or imagined in your lifetime. Your actions onstage are limited to your personal history and imagination. For the role in question, you will need to find elements within yourself that will allow you to create and believe in the circumstances of the unfamiliar character. Just as you depend on your voice and body to carry out your actions, you also depend on your mind to provide the proper impulses for those actions.

Fortunately, your history is not confined to what you have experienced in person; it comes from reading, listening, and observing countless sources. Research and the expansion of your historical imagination are important parts of your quest to unearth the truth in the world of the play, and part of talent is the ability to deepen and extend experiences in the imagination.

Suppose you have been cast as Shakespeare's Romeo or Juliet and the scene for rehearsal is Act III, Scene v, sometimes called the second balcony scene. To illustrate the current point, we need only recall the chief facts of the situation. Romeo and Juliet are the son and daughter of two powerful and wealthy families who have long been bitter enemies. Having met by chance, they have fallen deeply in love and have married secretly. Within an hour of their vows, Romeo, involved in an outbreak of the ancient hostility, has killed Juliet's cousin and has been banished from his native city of Verona. There seems to be no hope of happiness together as the young couple say farewell in the dawning light.

What an exciting prospect to play one of these famous lovers. You have now learned that you must be prepared to explore and expand (through research) your own personal history before you can possibly create a character in whose behavior you, the other actors, and the audience can believe. But how do you know where to find these inner sources that may be deeply rooted in the subconscious regions of your mind? How can you begin to match your own experience with that of the character? You begin with the script, first discovering the physical actions the character must perform. Before that, however, we will begin by giving rise to an environment that encourages maximum inspiration for the discovery of these actions, a truly **creative state** where you will be able to achieve full artistic expression.

# CHAPTER 2

## Approaching the Creative State

*"Tension is the actor's occupational disease."*

**Constantin Stanislavski**

There was no breeze to cut the sweltering heat and humidity that night in Ft. Worth, TX. Thousands of June bugs danced in the searing lights bearing down on opening night of Shakespeare in the Park's production of *Much Ado About Nothing*. Backstage, wearing oppressive clothing seemingly made from drapery material, a seasoned actor, playing the role of Don John, the bastard brother of Don Pedro, awaited his entrance onto the outdoor stage. At the conclusion of Act I, Scene ii, he turned on the battery pack secured around his waist and entered alongside the actor playing Conrade, Don John's companion.

**Conrade:** What the good-year, my lord, why are you thus out of measure sad?

**Don John:** There is no measure in the occasion that breeds, therefore the sadness is without limit.

Still unaccustomed to hearing the sound of his own voice electronically magnified, a feeling of self-consciousness overcame the actor. They continued.

**Conrade:** You should hear reason.

**Don John:** And when I have heard it, what blessing brings it?

**Conrade:** If not a present remedy, at least a patient sufferance.

**Don John:** I wonder that thou ...

The actor could not escape his own words reverberating across the grass-covered auditorium filled with strangers. “There must be a thousand people out there,” he thought. “And they’re all staring at me.” Trapped in his own head, he began to panic. Following a brief moment, he managed to say,

*Don John:* ... being, as thou say’st thou art, born under Saturn ...

He couldn’t breathe. His pulse raced. In his terror, the alien strangers in the auditorium appeared to be hungry cannibals waiting to devour him. He looked at his fellow actor for help—nothing but the deafening sound of bugs in the night. Disoriented, he mumbled,

*Don John:* goest about to apply a moral medicine to a mortifying mischief...

The actor went blank. There was nothing in his head but the awareness of being onstage. Utterly alone, completely self-absorbed in his terror, he tried to improvise his way out of this Shakespearean-sized actor’s nightmare. Through glassy eyes, the actor began to hyperventilate. Entirely helpless, he walked around the set, his mind spiraling into oblivion, before simply wandering offstage. Unresponsive to the stage manager’s frantic pleas, he slowly began to remove the oppressive clothing and electronic devices from his body. Completely overcome by stage fright, he simply sat in a chair surrounded by a host of stunned actors who had been awaiting their entrances. Silence.

Stage fright. This actor’s account is neither the first time this has happened, nor will it be the last. In fact, most performers, at one time or another, suffer from this terrifying condition that plagues more than 40 percent of American adults. Stories abound of celebrities who have been overcome by fear.

In a September 12, 2007, Web article, msnbc.com contributor, Patrick Enright, wrote the following accounts of numerous celebrities’ battles with this mental state.

**Renee Fleming.** In her autobiography, the celebrated soprano recalls her unexpected attack of nerves: “Nothing had happened to precipitate it, nothing had changed, but without warning, my throat closed up entirely.” Though she recovered, the experience left her temporarily miserable, physically and emotionally debilitated, and pondering a new future out of the limelight.

**Glenn Gould.** The renowned classical pianist retired from playing in front of a live audience at age 32 because of his discomfort with public recitals, retreating into the world of studio recording and radio performance. “I detest audiences. I think they are a force of evil,” he once said.

**Ian Holm.** During a 1976 performance of *The Iceman Cometh*, Holm walked offstage and refused to return. “Something just snapped,” he remembered in a 1998 interview. “Once the concentration goes, the brain literally closes down.” He focused on film and television work and, apart from one performance a few years later, didn’t return to the stage until 1993.



**Rod Stewart.** In 1968, the Rod Stewart–fronted Jeff Beck Group made its U.S. debut at New York’s Fillmore East Theater. Stewart was so nervous that he sang the entire first song from behind a stack of speakers.

**Laurence Olivier.** The man often considered the greatest actor of the twentieth century didn’t face the dreaded affliction until late middle age, but then it hit him hard. In one run at London’s National Theatre, Olivier had to have the stage manager push him onstage every night.

**Carly Simon.** The singer has had such a hard time with stage fright that she has at times poked herself in the hand with safety pins. On one memorable occasion that she recounted to *The New Yorker’s* John Lahr, she asked her entire band’s horn section to spank her just before the curtain rose.

**Barbra Streisand.** After forgetting the lyrics to one of her songs during a 1967 Central Park concert, Babs stopped performing live for almost three decades, fearing that she’d have the same problem again.

## CONFRONTING ANXIETY

The stage is a dangerous place. No one is firing bullets, but actors certainly feel under fire. Emotionally exposed, actors have the unnatural responsibility of baring their souls while standing before a group of strangers. To the actor overcome with fear, the audience can appear to be the enemy waiting to attack. Fear physically reveals itself through a variety of symptoms: sweaty palms, nervous stomach, feelings of nausea, dry mouth due to the digestive system temporarily shutting down, uncontrollable nervous energy, and excess tension in the hands, arms, mouth, eyes, or forehead. As bad as the physical manifestations of fear can be, the psychological results are far more devastating to the actor: *short-term memory loss*. Regardless, stage fright signifies a fight or flight response in the actor. He is not in any real danger, and yet he feels defenseless, open to the elements.<sup>1</sup>

Uncontrolled stage fright generally happens when an actor gets “in her head.” Sometimes, it results from poor rehearsal technique. Other times, stage fright happens because the actor has not properly warmed up and is mentally unprepared for the **transformation** into her new creation. Still other times, stage fright occurs when something onstage malfunctions: A telephone or doorbell doesn’t ring, someone misses an entrance or drops a line, a **prop** is misplaced or broken, and so on.

Film and television are not immune to stage fright; however, these media are relatively safe compared to live theatre. Aside from the production team, no audience watches the filming of a movie. Television programs sometimes accommodate studio audiences; however, if an actor forgets a line or misses an entrance, the director can simply shout, “Cut!” In both film and television, time is money—big money—but the director can reshoot a scene as many times as necessary. In post-production, the editor and

director can cut away, splice, and edit scenes until most mistakes are virtually erased from the finished product. For the actor, the camera is a safety net. The medium protects them from errors, freezing the final result in time. Even such shows as *Saturday Night Live* are taped “live” before a studio audience, but the broadcast occurs later that evening. No films and virtually no character-driven television programs are currently shot live. Many early TV shows, on the other hand, were presented in front of both the studio and televised audiences simultaneously. Today, outside newscasts and a handful of sporting events, almost everything is frozen in celluloid or by digital means. Following Janet Jackson’s infamous wardrobe malfunction at the halftime presentation of *Super Bowl XXXVIII*, even football has a fifteen-second delay.

Because peril lurks around every corner onstage, the idea of performing in live theatre terrifies many film and television actors. Mistakes *will* happen; it is merely a matter of when. Only your improvisational skills can sometimes save you from utter embarrassment and shame. After the curtain rises, no director or stage manager can stop the scene, thus leaving you and your partners standing emotionally unprotected before an expectant audience.

On the other hand, the communal experience that occurs between theatre performers and spectators is indescribable. To hold an audience spellbound by your actions, to speak powerful words to a group of people who are mesmerized by your interpretation, to deliver a punch line which in turn causes a thousand viewers to spontaneously laugh is intoxicating. As a stage actor, you will never be more alive than at that moment. But the stakes are high, and psychological inhibitions may be present.

In an attempt to overcome fear, phrases frequently heard in describing an actor’s state of being are “He forgets himself onstage” or “He forgets the audience and loses himself in the part.” Actors who *lose* themselves in their characters also lose control of their actions. They are extremely dangerous people to play opposite. Instead, you must “find yourself” in your role, and you must share a spiritual connection with your partners both onstage and off. *To enter into the proper state of being and to overcome stage fright, you must forget your limitations and inhibitions by concentrating on your character’s justifiable actions—your first circle of attention* (see Chapter 6). “Forgetting yourself onstage” implies you must enter into a trancelike state in which you are unaware of your surroundings and thus lose control of the situation. Actors can forget neither themselves nor the audience, and those who insist they do are either lying or insane. Instead, through a sixth sense, the duality of theatre, you must remain conscious of the “publicness” of your performance, but you must focus on the actions of your new human being.

While onstage, you must maintain an awareness of the audience, but you must not agonize about them. It is not your responsibility to keep them entertained. Instead, you must incorporate the Magic If. What would I do if I were this person in these circumstances? Worrying about the audience produces instant tension. Like actors, athletes also cherish the approval of the spectators, but during the game, they must concentrate solely on their actions. As LeBron

James soars to the goal, he is certainly aware of the people in the stands, yet he has one thing on his mind—the basket. While Caroline Wozniacki rallies against Maria Sharapova up match point, she knows she is being watched

Photo courtesy of the USC School of Theatre



**FIGURE 2.1**

Hong Hoang in the University of Southern California School of Theatre's production of *Our Lady of 121st Street*. Directed by L. Zane; costume design by Lauren Tyler; lighting design by Ashley Pinnix; scenic design by Kaitlyn Lee. Actors control stage fright by wrapping themselves in Stanislavski's first circle of attention.

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by millions of tennis fans around the world; nevertheless, she stays focused on one thing—her next stroke. The moment they get “in their heads,” anxiety may have devastating effects on their games. James will overshoot the basket; Wozniacki will pull her shot wide.

During competition, great athletes have exceedingly short memories, quickly forgetting minor errors or shortcomings of form. The small mishaps are irrelevant; their job is to win. Afterward, as a way of making mental and technical adjustments and improving their next performance, they reflect upon their errors—usually at the behest of an announcer who grabs them before they retreat to the locker room.

With regard to onstage mistakes, you too must have a short memory. When miscues occur, you will “win” by creating a believable person who behaves truthfully. To accomplish this, you must free yourself from worry over nonessentials. You must justify your actions and then focus your energies to pursue your character’s objective freely and fully. If you are absorbed in “your” activity, if you remain focused on “your” partner(s), uncontrollable anxiety resulting in short-term memory loss will disappear.

## CONTROLLING PHYSICAL TENSION

Lee Strasberg said, “Tension is the artist’s greatest enemy.” Through proper rehearsal technique, mental and physical preparation prior to the performance, onstage focus on justifiable actions, and communion with partners, an actor may have worked through the psychological effects of memory loss due to stage fright. However, he must still consider the negative effects of muscular rigidity due to simple excess tension.

Stanislavski referred to tension as the actor’s occupational disease. In *My Life in Art*, he wrote, “In searching for a way out of the unbearable state of a person who is being forcibly exhibited and who is compelled against his human will and need to create ... we resort to false, artificial techniques of theatrical acting.” Excess nerves onstage fracture your state of mind. Nervous actors become preoccupied with self, which does nothing but hinder the creative process. Under extreme anxiety, actors discover and resort to these false or **indicated** ways to cope with this unnatural setting, which usually means excess tension in the voice or on the face, shoulders, or hands. They begin to rely on false gestures, which eventually become the actor’s habitual way to manage pressure. Onstage, it merely reads as actor tension rather than having anything to do with truthful acting choices.

As long as physical anxiety exists onstage, you cannot focus on the delicate shadings of feeling or the spiritual life of your part. Consequently, before you attempt to create anything, you must get your muscles in proper condition so they do not impede your actions. You will never be entirely liberated from these enemies because they cannot simply be outgrown as you gain experience. Therefore, you must develop more or less conscious techniques of relaxing. While onstage, you must strive to eliminate all tension not absolutely needed to execute a movement, say a line, or maintain a position. Economy of effort characterizes both good movement and good speech.





Courtesy of Purdue University. Photo by John Underwood.

## FIGURE 2.2

A scene from Purdue University's production of *Hair*. Directed by Amanda Folena; costume design by Shelby Newport, Jessica Pribble, and Emily Waecker; lighting design by Chris Holland; scenic design by Russ Jones. Removing excess tension allows this group of actors to relax and make more creative physical choices onstage.

The ability to relax is necessary to the internal as well as the external aspects of acting, for excess tension inhibits freedom of movement and thought; Stanislavski made this point clear by demonstrating the impossibility of multiplying 37 times 9 while holding up the corner of a piano. The actor's unwanted tension is often just as great as that required to lift a heavy weight, and playing a clear objective certainly demands as much mental acuity as solving a multiplication problem.

The inability to relax shatters your ability to perform a believable character. If you are overly tense onstage, the audience inevitably focuses on the resulting nervous mannerisms rather than on the actions of your character. These false mannerisms belong to you, not the person you are portraying, so they destroy the believability of the scene.

## FREEING SOCIAL INHIBITIONS

Other emotional inhibitions can also be tremendous obstacles for an actor. An honest portrayal of King Lear's descent into madness or Blanche DuBois' painful deterioration requires great depth of feeling. For the actor playing the role of Alan Strang in *Equus*, being physically naked in front of an audience may not compare to the difficulty of revealing this young man's internal

anguish. Great pieces of dramatic literature sometimes demand extraordinary things from you, actions that will force you to confront your personal “hang-ups.” Some roles compel you to stand emotionally exposed before an audience as you reveal “your” inner self. Phèdra’s uncontrollable passion for her stepson and Ophelia’s emotional decline and subsequent suicide force the actor to face a number of inhibitions.

An onstage kiss is so incredibly simple, and yet kissing is one of mankind’s most intimate acts of affection. Therefore, it is one of the most difficult things for some actors to do “fully.” Romantically touching “your” lover, hugging, holding hands, touching someone’s face, even the act of really looking into someone else’s eyes can all be very intimidating to the young actor. Intimate speech involving painful and emotional memories can be extraordinarily difficult. For that matter, foul language and violence may be just as awkward as affection.

All human beings have a unique sense of moral rightness, and each person carries a lifetime of emotional baggage. You may consider yourself to be an extremely affectionate and passionate person who has no problems with touch and intimacy. You may think of yourself as socially liberal, free from “hang-ups.” On the other hand, you may be rather shy and reserved. You may have difficulty demonstrating love—particularly with someone whom you have just met or whom you consider a friend. No matter how extroverted or introverted, how liberal or conservative you consider yourself, chances are you harbor personal or societal inhibitions.

Social inhibitions take many forms. They vary substantially from society to society, from era to era, and from individual to individual. In American culture, for instance, men rarely touch one another except to shake hands or to engage in playful banter. But in other societies, such as France or Italy, it is perfectly acceptable for men to kiss, embrace, and walk arm in arm in public. Even succeeding generations within the same culture have different sets of social inhibitions. Social embarrassments may have prevented our great-grandparents from wearing bikinis to the beach or shorts on a hot day. An important key to freeing inhibitions, then, is to understand them by assessing your character’s society, customs, and traditions.

Still, the relationship between social inhibitions and the individual person remains complex. Why is it that some actors are less hindered by social inhibitions onstage than others are? Can an actor from a conservative background learn not to wince (either internally or externally) at using suggestive behavior or foul language onstage? What are the actor’s rights and responsibilities in these delicate areas?

These questions have no easy answers. You must develop your own moral compass, turning down roles in which you feel yourself exploited. On the other hand, after you have accepted a role, you have a responsibility to behave truthfully from your character’s point of view, even when the character’s actions differ from your own personal choices. The question is not “What would *I* (the actor) do?” but rather “What would ‘I’ do?” Also remember the comment from Chapter 1, “You must never judge your character; otherwise, you will never be able to sustain belief in ‘your’

Photo courtesy of Western Illinois University Visual Production Center. Photo by Larry Dean.



**FIGURE 2.3**

A scene from Western Illinois University's production of *Moon Over Buffalo*. Directed by DC Wright; scenic design by David Patrick; lighting design by Tony Luetkenhaus; costume design by Ray Gabica. Almost all actors will encounter onstage intimacy at some point in their careers. An onstage kiss is so incredibly simple, and yet it is one of the most difficult things for some actors to do "fully."

actions." If you believe in the circumstances and concentrate on the reasons that "you" behave the way "you" do, you, the actor, soon will lose your inhibitions. They will slip away as you involve yourself in "your" simple objectives. Internal logic will prevail as you look at the world through his eyes.

Finally, it is realistic to expect that today's actor may have to decide whether playing a character in the nude is artistically justified. For example,



the nudity found in Arthur Miller's *Playing for Time*, set within the confines of a Nazi concentration camp, is completely substantiated. Mrs. Kendall's intimate removal of her top for the benefit of John Merrick (the Elephant Man) is artistically justifiable. David Storey's *The Changing Room* takes place in the locker room of an English rugby team. At one time, all the players appear nude while changing from street clothing into their uniforms. The nudity is not central to the meaning of the play, but it is a necessary and rational part of the play's locale. Obviously, too much self-consciousness would work against an actor's ability to create the easygoing, uninhibited locker room banter. If you consider the nudity to be gratuitous, you may want to refrain from auditioning. If you are not comfortable enough with your body to rehearse and perform the play in the nude, regardless of its necessity to character, forward movement of the plot, and artistic justification, you obviously should not consider the role.

## TRAINING YOUR BODY

Intensive efforts have been made to discover a genuinely effective program in body training for the actor. These efforts have produced significant changes in both concept and practice, together with an emphasis on carefully directed work in stage movement. Several influential approaches to actor training were developed by such modern pioneers as Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, Joseph Chaikin, and Arthur Lessac, great innovators who were oriented to physical training as a means of developing the actor's total instrument. Literally hundreds of teachers and "systems" have sprung from the work of one or another of these individuals, some of brief duration and others that have made genuine contributions to actor training throughout the world. All these people would agree with Grotowski in his groundbreaking book, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, that "the most elementary fault [of the actor], and that in most urgent need of correction, is the over-straining of the voice because one forgets to speak with the body."

Practically, body training is designed to accomplish two basic, closely related objectives: *proper body alignment* and *freedom from excess muscle tension*. Accomplishment of these objectives enables the actor to move in any direction from a standing, sitting, or lying position with a minimum of effort and without a preparatory shifting of weight. Together they produce strong, efficient, unforced movement.

**Centering**, which refers to posture and proper alignment, is sometimes misunderstood to imply something that is static or artificially frozen. Many people believe that "correct" posture is synonymous with a stiff and artificial carriage. Correct alignment is our body's natural position. Look at babies who have just learned to sit up by themselves. Notice their relaxed and yet perfect posture. Poor alignment usually happens as a result of a lifetime of bad habits. As we age, we habitually distort and misshape our bodies. We slouch in our chairs; we slump our shoulders; we drag our feet; we hang our heads. As an actor, you must understand each person you create is entirely different from you—both internally and externally. The manner



in which they walk, sit, stand, and gesture is unique. Until you fully realize your own body alignment, your own habitual carriage, you will never go beyond yourself when embodying another person. Until you make a conscious effort to return your body to the alignment intended by nature, you remain blissfully ignorant, limiting your range as an actor. Natural alignment is best achieved under the guidance of a skilled instructor; however, a description of the ideal will help you understand the work required to attain it.

Body training involves muscular relaxation, a quality that characterizes all fine acting. The goal of relaxation is not dormancy. Instead, it should provide a state of alertness in which you can attain your utmost capacity for accomplishing any activity. Relaxation bolsters your courage and increases your self-confidence. Referred to it as “blissful relaxation” and the “potent state,” Robert Benedetti, in *The Actor at Work*, summed up this state of being as a “kind of relaxation ... in which you are most ready to react, like a cat in front of a mouse hole. Tensions that would inhibit movement are gone, and you are in a state of balance that leaves you free to react in any way required.”



Photo courtesy of Elon University Department of Performing Arts.

## FIGURE 2.4

A scene from Elon University Department of Performing Arts' production of *The Phantom of the Opera*. Directed by Catherine McNeela; costume design by Jack Smith; lighting design by William Webb; scenic design by Dale Becherer. Centering is the body's natural position, with a relaxed spine in correct alignment. Poor posture usually happens as a result of a lifetime of bad habits.

Actors who have not attained a state of muscular freedom will often be told, “Just relax; take it easy.” These words can easily produce the opposite of the desired effect by causing actors to become more aware of their tension and, consequently, to become more uptight. Unfortunately, no exercise program will eliminate excess tension in a few easy lessons. You achieve the creative state through a lifelong regimen of training, relentless in its demand on your time and energy.

## SEARCHING FOR INSPIRATION

Inspiration comes from within. Famed Broadway vocal coach Judith Farris refers to it as “an inside job.” Your body and voice are simply instruments, subordinate to the beckoning of your internal virtuosity. An out-of-tune musical instrument, no matter the emotional and physical health of the musician, will never produce beautiful music. If an actor possesses a faulty instrument (his body), it will cripple creativity and alter interpretation.

Throughout his career, Stanislavski worked to develop a technique in which inspiration could be mined and called upon as needed. He approached this unique problem, however, knowing this vexing contradictory fact: *Inspiration cannot be summarily beckoned at will, and yet the very nature of acting requires you do just that.* No matter your personal state of being, the curtain rises every night at the same time. The audience does not care about your personal problems. They have no interest in the physical and emotional turmoil of your actual life. They paid more than \$100 for their ticket, and they want (no, demand) brilliance. As an actor, the ability to summon an inspired performance is your job. Theatrical management will not “hold the house” while you search for inspiration backstage.

Stanislavski revered great actors who had the innate ability to deliver inspired portrayals at every performance. True inspiration eluded most working actors, and he was no exception. Understanding the complexity of this paradoxical dilemma, Stanislavski pondered and experimented for years in his attempt to find the answer. The mystery of summoned inspiration became his quest, his holy grail. It became the motivating force behind the development and evolution of his “system.” Inspiration was vague and elusive. Through uncompromising discipline he sought order, a conscious and systematic approach to tapping into the subconscious regions of the mind. Through something he referred to as the **psychophysical** process, he believed a relaxed body and mind to be synonymous. *A tranquil mind induces muscular relaxation, and a relaxed body frees creative thought.*

“All artistic people, from geniuses to the simply talented, are capable to a greater or lesser degree of arriving at this imaginative state in mysterious intuitive ways; however, they are not empowered to regulate and control it arbitrarily,” wrote Irina and Igor Levin in their book, *The Stanislavsky Secret*. You cannot rely on intuition any more than you can rely on inspiration. How do you create an environment that is conducive to inspiration? Are there any technical means to accomplish this? Be forewarned that technical does not translate as “artificial”; more accurately, it means



Photo by Kenneth L. Stilson

### FIGURE 2.5

A scene from Southeast Missouri State University's production of *Carousel*. Directed by Dennis Courtney; costume design by Rhonda Weller-Stilson; lighting design by Phil Macy; scenic design by Jeffrey Luetkenhaus. The muscular relaxation demonstrated by the ladies in this photo can be attained through a conscious and systematic approach that taps into the subconscious regions of the mind.

scientific and procedural. The Levins go on to quote Stanislavski as having asked, "How to go about making this state not appear unexpectedly, but be created by the actor's own will, on his 'order?' And if it should be impossible to acquire this state immediately, could it be done piecemeal—put together, so to speak, from separate elements?" The answer is yes. Through various breathing, mental, and physical exercises designed to induce *focused relaxation*, an actor can enter into what Stanislavski referred to as the **creative state**.

## ENTERING THE CREATIVE STATE

Let's now turn to a sequence of exercises designed to help you remove tensions and promote the creative state. Various combinations of the following exercises can serve as an excellent warm-up routine before classes, rehearsals, or performances. Just as a baseball player warms up before a game and a pianist does scales before performing, you must always prepare your body, mind, and voice for the work at hand. You should *never* commence a sustained period of rehearsal or performance without warming up.



The following exercises are sequential and move logically through six basic phases:

- *Centering and Breathing*
- *Focusing*
- *Tensing and Releasing*
- *Stretching*
- *Moving*
- *Vocalizing*

Remember, as you begin the following sequence, you must have enough room so your movements will not be restricted, and you should not wear clothing that will hamper your freedom.

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## EXERCISE 2.1

### CENTERING AND BREATHING

Your physical and emotional state of being is directly related to your breathing. For the overly anxious actor, breathing quickens, perhaps becoming erratic. Relaxed breathing, on the other hand, is slow, calm, and rhythmic. By controlling your breath, through regular practice of specific exercises, your mind and your emotions can be stilled, even under the pressure of being onstage. Studies have shown breathing exercises can be very effective in aborting and preventing uncontrollable stage fright.

Under normal circumstances, only a small number of adults breathe properly. Therefore, if you breathe incorrectly in your daily life, the stage will only magnify your existing bad habits. Two requisites for acquiring correct breathing are:

- Finding your center, including a high, still breastbone, and
- Breathing in and out quietly and gently at the bottom of the chest without allowing any movement of the shoulders.

Breathing “naturally” for someone with poor posture does not necessarily mean the easiest form of breathing. The slouching actor may find correct breathing difficult, even uncomfortable, at first. According to Broadway vocal coach Keith Davis, you should begin with the breastbone. If the posture is centered and correct, the breastbone is up and still. It does not move when inhaling or exhaling. It is maintained in the “up” position by a definite muscular action, which, for a time, may require significant effort. The breastbone should never be forced up or strained. Rather, it should be lifted *before* filling the lungs with air. Do not lift the shoulders at any time. From the first lesson on centering and breathing, the student should follow the rule: *Keep the*



*breastbone high and still, and the upper chest comfortably filled with air at all times.*

Uncontrollable stage fright is the physical, mental, and emotional reaction to stress. The following exercises function like meditation. They force you to focus your attention, clearing your mind of racing thoughts while relaxing your physical body.

#### **A. Stretching and Compressing**

Lying with your back on the floor, make yourself as long as possible. After one minute, make yourself as short as possible, compressing your vertebrae as much as you can. Again after one minute, make yourself as wide as possible, flattening your body and stretching as far as you can from side to side. Now, make yourself as narrow as possible without decreasing your length.

#### **B. Stacking Vertebrae**

Roll to your side, in a tucked position, and then over so your face and stomach are facing the floor. With your feet on the ground, uncoil into a standing position by aligning (or stacking) your vertebrae one at a time, with your head being the last part to uncurl. From this standing position, gently lift from the lower part of your spine, again making yourself as tall as possible. Drop the upper half of your body forward like a rag doll. Your hands will probably brush against the floor. Let your knees bend slightly for balance and support. Locate the excess tension and gently move that part of your upper body, allowing the tension to drip out of your skin. Alleviate the tension in your face by making a “motor boat” sound. Don’t be afraid to drool on the floor. Now, gently sway from side to side three or four times and then rise to a standing position by again aligning (or stacking) your vertebrae one at a time. Drop from the waist, and repeat the entire sequence.

#### **C. Keith Davis Posture Exercise**

Stand with your back toward the wall, feet shoulder width apart, placing your heels about six inches away from the surface. Lean back until your shoulders touch the wall. Press back to eliminate the gap between your lower back and the surface. Note the alignment in your body from the hips up.

Keeping your back flat against the wall, slowly pull your heels back to the wall, causing some space to return between the small of your back and the surface. The space, however, should not exceed the thickness of your hand, which is done by leveling the pelvic area and pulling in the abdominal muscles.

Now move away from the wall and try to duplicate the feeling of posture you had while pressing against it. Your weight should be on the balls of your feet, heels lightly touching the floor. Your

chest is high, and your shoulders are back, remaining loose and free. The lower abdominal wall, just above the pubic area, is pulled in and up, removing stress from the lumbar region.

Feel the stretch between your pelvic bone and your floating ribcage. This elastic up-and-forward, out-of-the-hips feeling combined with a high chest and level pelvis results in a floating, energetic feeling. Correct posture frees the body. It allows good stage presence because of its more active flexibility, permitting easier tone emission.

At this point, you will be *standing tall*, and the “tip at the back of the top of your head” will be the tallest point. The bottom line of your chin is parallel with the floor, as you relax your front neck muscles—a condition essential to eliminating vocal tension. Your shoulders will be rounded forward to obtain the widest possible space between the shoulder blades. You should think of the shoulder blades as a double gate that is always kept open. Square-shouldered, closed-gate, military posture produces tensions and inhibits the body’s natural expressiveness. Your abdominal muscles will be held firmly in place and the buttocks tucked under, properly aligning the spine from top to bottom. When you stand in this position against a wall, only a small space will remain between the wall and your lower back. Your arms swing freely from the shoulders, and your knees will be relaxed.

#### **D. 4-7-8 Breathing**

Lying on your back, place one hand on your abdomen and the other on your chest. Close your eyes, breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth. Throughout the exercises, keep the tip of your tongue in contact with the top of your mouth, just behind your top teeth. Make sure to keep your breastbone still. Pay attention to your breathing rate and how the air feels in your lungs.

Begin by slowly inhaling, smoothly and deeply to a mental count of four seconds. Hold your breath while counting to seven. Slowly and smoothly exhale while mentally counting to eight. As you exhale, try to release your anxiety, tension, and stress.

When people are anxious or stressed, they tend to take shallow breaths, breathing from their shoulders, leading to hyperventilation. Proper breathing involves expanding the lungs and diaphragm without involving the shoulders.

#### **E. Meditative Breathing**

Remaining with your back on the floor, allow your arms to rest at your side. Extend your legs straight out along the floor away from your head, and allow them to roll outward in a comfortable position. Open your eyes and pick a point on the ceiling, making that your focal point during this exercise. Maintain the same

breathing rhythm established in the 4-7-8 Breathing Exercise; however, you should now begin to vocalize an elongated [a] sound as you exhale. Continue this breathing pattern until instructed to do otherwise. Notice the movement of your abdomen while keeping your breastbone completely still. Try to suppress all other thoughts, feelings, and sensations. If you feel your attention wandering, merely redirect your mind back to your focal point and breathing.

Now as you breathe in, channel your attention to different parts of your body (i.e., right leg, left leg, abdomen, chest, right arm, and left arm). Take your time, completing the cycle two times.

#### **F. Muscular Breathing**

Remaining flat on your back with your palms and outstretched fingers resting on your lower abdomen, inflate your stomach muscles so the entire lower abdomen area protrudes. Hold for ten seconds before collapsing in your stomach muscles as far as you can for ten seconds. Repeat these steps over and over again until you can perform a rocking motion.

Once you have learned this muscle control, you are ready to regulate your breathing with this muscular action. Try to make your breathing as smooth and as effortless as possible, with the breath flowing in and out of your lungs in one seemingly endless stream—NOT holding your breath after inhaling.

Now we synchronize breathing with the learned muscular motion. Do the following breathing exercises slowly and fluidly without holding your breath.

- Breathe in through your nostrils as your lower abdomen rises.
- Breathe out through your mouth while vocalizing the “ah” sound as your abdomen falls.

Repeat the process until instructed to stop. As you breathe out, feel the tension flood out of your body and into the floor. Feel it flow through your pores; feel it dissolve through the skin of your back at those places where it comes in contact with the floor. Feel your muscles relax as this tension flows out.

Once you have mastered this type of muscular breathing from the floor, you can do this exercise from a standing position.

#### **G. Bumble Bee Breathing**

Sitting upright in a comfortable position, relax your shoulders back into a neutral position, opening your chest. Inhale slowly through your nose, filling your lungs to capacity. Remember to keep your breastbone still. Pause for three seconds, then slowly exhale through your mouth, using your tongue to make a buzzing sound, like a bee. Repeat three to five times, pausing for three seconds between each inhale and exhale.

**H. Alternate Nostril Breathing**

Sit in a comfortable, upright position. Close the right nostril with your right thumb and inhale slowly through the left nostril. Close the left nostril with your right ring finger, remove your thumb from the right nostril, and exhale slowly through the right nostril. Then, inhale through the right nostril, close the right nostril with your right thumb and exhale through the left nostril. This is one of the most common forms of yoga exercises. Repeat as long as you feel comfortable.

**I. Sunrise Breathing**

From a kneeling position, sit back on your heels. Focus on your breathing. Inhale through your nose while slowly raising your hands (palms front) over your head. As you inhale, stretch your torso upward while tilting your head slightly back. Hold your breath and body in the raised position for a few seconds. Exhale through your mouth while lowering your arms and torso and returning your head to a neutral position. Repeat as long as you feel comfortable. This exercise can be combined with the 4-7-8 Breathing Exercise.

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**EXERCISE 2.2****FOCUSING**

As an actor studying the **Stanislavski System**, you must learn to relax your muscles through various means. The goal is to use only the muscles needed to perform a particular onstage action. Focus exercises help you reach a relaxed state of **solitude in public** while performing onstage.

**A. Focus on Sound**

Sit comfortably on the floor with your hands to your side, your back straight, and your legs crossed. Close your eyes and concentrate on every sound you hear, from the loudest to the quietest: people breathing around you, a door opening and closing in the next room, a train off in the distance, the hum of the air conditioning unit, and so on. Try to focus solely on sounds, excluding everything else from your mind. The next step is to open your eyes and try to retain the same amount of focus.

**B. Focus on Personal Object**

Select a small personal object you have with you and you like a great deal (e.g., a watch, a necklace, a key chain, a ring, or a tube of lipstick). Place the object on the floor in front of you, and focus your attention on this object as you inhale and exhale slowly and deeply for one to two minutes. Allow any thoughts that arise to play across your consciousness, and then simply return your awareness to the object in front of you. At the end of this exercise, you should feel more peaceful and calmer.



**EXERCISE 2.3****TENSING AND RELEASING**

Throughout each phase of relaxation exercises, you should frequently check yourself against excess tension. Most of us have tensions of which we are not aware, and relieving them is an ever-present problem, in life as well as onstage. We go about our daily activities—walking, sitting, driving, even lying down—using more than the required energy. We should develop a habit of frequently checking ourselves in whatever we are doing to discover what muscles are unnecessarily tense and then proceed to relax them. We may often find we are holding onto a pencil as if it would jump out of our fingers, or we are walking with tense shoulders or standing with our knees locked, talking with a tight jaw, or reading with a frown.

Routinely checking for tensions and relieving them yields several benefits. Although it may be impossible, onstage or off, to keep an overabundance of tension from occurring, this habit will help induce a state of general relaxation. Our goal is to eliminate excess tensions at will—a capacity of great value to actors, who are always subject to nervous strain. Perhaps most important, finding tension helps actors discover their own nervous mannerisms. Different people reveal tensions in different ways, some by contracted muscles, and others by random movements. Among the most common movements are shaking the head, pursing the lips, frowning, snapping the fingers, and raising the shoulders. Make an inventory of your personal signs of tension, and focus on ridding yourself of them.

To release excess tension, we begin by creating it deliberately and then letting it go. As each area is named, isolate and tense the muscles associated with that part of your body for approximately fifteen seconds, while keeping the rest of your body relaxed. On the instructor's command, release the tension with a vocalized and elongated [a]. Feel the muscular movement as tension is released. We will work our way down the body from your head to your toes.

- A. Face**
- B. Neck and Shoulders**
- C. Right Arm and Hand**
- D. Left Arm and Hand**
- E. Upper Chest and Back**
- F. Abdomen and Lower Back**
- G. Groin and Buttocks**
- H. Right Leg and Foot**
- I. Left Leg and Foot**
- J. Your Entire Body**

After you have completed the sequence, repeat the entire exercise again, but this time hold the tension in each area for only three seconds, remembering to keep everything free of tension until its turn in the sequence.

**EXERCISE 2.4****STRETCHING**

Stretching prepares our bodies for physical activity. Although it lowers blood pressure and improves blood flow to the heart, for the actor (and athletes), stretching also increases muscle temperature, making them more pliable and adaptable to changes from the body's habitual use. The following is a sequence of stretching exercises that flow logically from one to the next, beginning in a supine position on the floor, then sitting upright, and finally from a standing position.

**A. Stretch and Yawn**

Lie on your back comfortably on the floor, and stretch your entire body. Extend your limbs, drop your jaw, and yawn. Repeat and encourage a "real" yawn. Let the natural vocalized sound empty out of your body.

**B. Spinal Stretch (Shoulder Press)**

Place your arms at your sides. Relax the small of your back, and stretch your legs out parallel to each other. Now lift your legs and hips by making a tripod with your elbows on the floor. Extend your legs toward the ceiling, making sure your toes are pointed. Hold for fifteen seconds. Continue this movement, keeping your legs straight, until your toes touch the floor above your head. After fifteen seconds, bend your knees, bringing them to your ears. Take a deep breath. Straighten your legs and again extend to a vertical position with your toes pointing toward the ceiling. Slowly roll your body back down using your spine until you are again lying flat on the floor. Take another deep breath, and repeat the entire sequence.

**C. Posterior Stretch**

Bend your right leg, and place both hands around the underside of your right knee. Pull the knee toward your left shoulder, keeping your head, shoulders, and right leg relaxed. Hold for fifteen seconds and repeat. This time, however, pull both your right knee and ankle toward your left shoulder. Repeat the entire sequence with your left knee and ankle.

**D. Lower Back Stretch (Diagonal Twist)**

Straighten your legs, and place your arms straight out from your body. Raise your right leg, rotate it over to the left at a ninety-degree angle, and touch the floor with your right foot. Rotate your upper torso the other direction, looking to the right. Be certain your right hip is pointed up to the ceiling. Hold for fifteen seconds, and repeat with the left leg. When you are finished, repeat the entire sequence two additional times.

**E. Front of Trunk Stretch (The Cobra)**

Roll onto your stomach, bring your hands to the sides of your shoulders, and ease your chest off the floor, keeping your hips firmly pressed onto the ground. Hold for fifteen seconds and repeat.

**F. Lower Back Stretch (The Cat)**

Assume a position on your hands and knees (like a cat), and then arch your back toward the ceiling. After fifteen seconds, press your spine toward the ground. Now, sit back on your heels, and reach forward with your arms. When you have completed the three-part sequence, repeat two additional times.

**G. Middle Eastern Prayer Stretch**

Begin in a tucked position with your knees, face, and arms resting comfortably on the floor. Inhale to the count of four as you rise to a kneeling position, sitting on your lower legs with your arms at your sides. Exhale to the count of four as you put your hands on the floor behind you, and push forward and up as far as you can with your pelvis. Inhale to the count of four as you return to the sitting position. Then, exhale to the count of four as you return to the original Middle Eastern Prayer position (i.e., tucked with knees, face, and arms on the floor). Repeat the sequence once, using four counts for each movement, and then repeat the sequence twice, using two counts for each movement.

**H. Groin Stretch**

Sit with tall posture, and ease your feet toward your body, bringing the soles together and allowing your knees to come up and out to the side. Resting your hands on your lower legs or ankles, ease both knees toward the ground. Hold for fifteen seconds and repeat.

**I. Hamstring Stretch**

Start with your legs stretched in front of you, and place the sole of your left foot alongside your right knee. Allow your left leg to lie relaxed on the ground and bend forward, keeping your back straight. Hold for fifteen seconds, and repeat with your other leg.

**J. Lower Spine Stretch**

From a squatting position on the floor, give yourself a wide base by placing your feet wider than shoulder width apart. Roll up your spine—one vertebra at a time—to a standing position and reach for the ceiling. Hold for fifteen seconds. Bending at the waist and keeping your spine straight (known as “flat back”), reach forward, making certain to keep your head up and looking forward. Hold for fifteen seconds before relaxing the spine and hanging from the waist down to the ground (“rag doll position”). Repeat the sequence.

**K. Chest Stretch**

Standing tall with your wide base and knees slightly bent, hold your arms out to the side parallel with the ground and the palms of your hands facing forward. Clasp your hands together behind your back and gently lift. Hold for fifteen seconds, and return to the original position. Repeat.

**L. Shoulder Stretch**

Place your right arm parallel with the ground across the front of your chest. Bend your left arm up, and use the left forearm to ease

the right arm closer to your chest. Hold for fifteen seconds, and repeat with left arm.

**M. Shoulder and Triceps Stretch (The Back Scratch)**

Keeping your wide base, fully extend both arms above your head. Drop your right hand, and swing your left hand around your back to grab your right elbow. Hold for fifteen seconds, and repeat with left hand.

**N. Side Stretch**

From your wide base position, again hold your arms out to your side parallel with the ground and the palms of your hands facing forward. Keeping your arms straight, take your left arm up and over your head, reaching to the right. Take your right arm across your chest and reach to the left. Hold for fifteen seconds, and repeat to the other side. Repeat the sequence.

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## EXERCISE 2.5

### MOVING

**A. Shaking**

While standing in place, simply “shake” the tension out of the following areas of your body: wrists, right elbow, right arm, left elbow, left arm, right leg, and left leg.

**B. Walk/Run/Freeze**

Everybody in class begins by walking. Do not perform this action for anybody else’s benefit. Do not “act,” and avoid walking in a circle. Note the way you carry yourself, the way your feet touch the ground, and the way you move your arms. Where is your center? Do you lead with your chest? Your head? Your pelvis? Change directions. Modify your stride. See yourself in relation to everyone in the room. Throughout this sequence, you may interact with others as you walk. Have fun. When the impulse arises, run. Run fast (but in control). Now you are either walking or running. Follow some others in the class. Note the distinct way they carry themselves, and adapt your movement to theirs. Do not enlarge upon or mock their movement; instead, note the subtle differences. Break away in a different direction. Don’t plan these actions. Be impulsive. Be erratic. Sometimes you are walking; sometimes you are running; sometimes you are following; sometimes you are not. Continue this pattern for a while, noting your body’s changes. Freeze. Do not move a muscle or look about the room. Note your position, your carriage. Where is your center? Resume moving. Sometimes you are walking; sometimes you are running; sometimes you are frozen; sometimes you are following; sometimes you are not.

**C. Run/Freeze**

Everyone in the room runs at the same time; everyone freezes at the same time. There are no leaders. There are no followers. Everyone must work together.



After a few minutes and upon the orders of your instructor, stand face to face with a single partner. Move at the same time; freeze at the same time. You do not have to mirror your partner. Your movements will be distinct in both form and tempo-rhythm. But you must start and stop at exactly the same time. Vary the lengths of time you move and freeze. Explore various movements, using your entire body. Again, be erratic. No one is leading; no one is following.

Again at the discretion of your instructor, change partners. Stand face to face, and move at different times. Partner A moves while Partner B remains frozen. Partner A continues to move until Partner B interrupts him with her movement. Partner A freezes while Partner B moves. Partner B continues to move until Partner A interrupts her. This pattern continues until you are instructed to stop. Your movements should not be empty forms, but rather they should reflect your state of mind.

#### **D. Shaping/Reshaping**

Again, change partners, and determine Partner A and Partner B. A makes an abstract shape (like a statue). B makes a different shape, and places it in relation to A's shape. After B has assumed a shape, A steps out of the original shape and reshapes in relation to B's shape, and so on. Fill the negative space without touching. Move slowly and smoothly. Think creatively, using your whole body. As you do this, consider the following suggestions with regard to your shapes.

- |            |           |            |
|------------|-----------|------------|
| • circular | • angular | • spacious |
| • twisted  | • complex | • closed   |
| • flowing  | • rugged  | • arched   |
| • muscular | • sensual | • diagonal |

Now consider the following images, and design your shapes/reshapes accordingly.

- |                       |                   |                |
|-----------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| • a gentle breeze     | • lightning       | • rapids       |
| • a hurricane         | • ice             | • a waterfall  |
| • an erupting volcano | • melting ice     | • light rain   |
| • a mudslide          | • sunrise         | • a storm      |
| • an earthquake       | • a flowing river | • hail         |
| • a geyser            | • falling leaves  | • a tornado    |
| • gentle waves        | • steam           | • a tidal wave |

#### **E. Walking with Purpose (Justifying Your Actions)**

Everyone in the class begins walking again. As you did in Exercise 2.6B, avoid walking in circles. Note your carriage, your feet, your arms, and your center. Now begin to walk with specific purpose. Walk (or crawl) as if you were:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| • a bedridden patient taking her first steps after a prolonged illness. | • a hunter stalking game.                          |
|   | • a trapper wearing snowshoes retrieving his prey. |

- a first grader in line to see Santa Claus.
- someone with a massive hangover.
- a football player dancing his way to the sidelines after scoring a touchdown.
- a baby learning to walk.
- a dancer exiting the stage.
- a seductive person approaching someone of the opposite sex.
- an awkward teen nervously approaching someone of the opposite sex.
- someone who is completely intoxicated trying to prove he is sober.
- a morbidly obese person speed walking.
- a gymnast approaching his apparatus.
- an intruder breaking into someone's home.
- a soldier crawling on your stomach under gunfire.
- a fashion model on the runway.
- a troubled elementary student heading to the principal's office.
- an elderly person trying to cross a busy intersection.
- a woman who is nine months pregnant headed toward her car.
- an athlete with a sprained ankle.

#### F. Point to Point

All should stop wherever they are in the room. You are now at Point A. Do not move until you have determined Point B. This point should not be arbitrary or "in space." It should be a specific destination. When Point B is determined, take the shortest, logical path to that spot. After you have arrived at Point B, determine Point C. Cross to that point, and so on. Continue this exercise, moving point to point, with the following variations.

- Cross with different tempo-rhythms. Be specific and justify your actions. For example, you are late for an important meeting, or you are an elementary student who has been sent to the principal's office.
- Cross with the intent of completing a specific activity. For example, you cross to the dictionary to look up a specific word, or you cross to your backpack to retrieve your hairbrush and brush your hair.

**EXERCISE 2.6****VOCALIZING**

Muscles simply work better when exercised. Just as an athlete stretches her legs and upper body before running, an actor must work the muscles required for good speech every day. With practice, your vocal quality will improve. Your articulation will become more clear and crisp, making you more easily understandable, and as you strengthen your speech muscles, you will increase your stamina to talk longer without vocal fatigue.

**A. Vocal Warm-Up**

- Massage your face with the palm of your hands and fingertips. Apply some pressure, paying particular attention to your jaw, your nasal-labial folds (your “laugh-lines”), and your forehead.
- Vocalize the sound “hummmmmmmmm” five times.
- Shake your face back and forth. Your cheeks and lips should be loose.
- Wet your lips and stretch your mouth open as wide as possible.
- Make the sound of a motorboat—first without sound, then with monotone sound, and finally with sound that moves up and down in pitch.
- Stick out your tongue as far as you can. With your tongue, touch the tip of your nose, your cheek on the right side, your chin, your cheek on the left side, and so on.
- Anchor your tongue behind your bottom front teeth, and pulsate your tongue with a sigh, “aaaaaahhhhhh.”
- Make the sound of a drum roll—first without sound, then with monotone sound, and finally with sound that moves up and down in pitch.
- Repeat the sound [k] five times, projecting it to the back wall of your classroom or performance space. Now repeat the sound [g] five times. Alternate between [k] and [g] five times. Repeat the sound [p] five times. Repeat the sound [b] five times. Alternate between [p] and [b] five times.
- Vocalize “hummmmmmm maaaaaahhhhhh” five times, raising your pitch each subsequent time.
- Again, make the sound of a motorboat.
- Vocalize “me me me me me me me me maaaaaahhhhhh” five times.
- Again, massage your face with your palms and fingertips.
- Vocalize “me me me me may may may may maaaaaahhhhhh” five times, making certain to drop the jaw as you say “maaaaaahhhhhh.”
- Repeat “me me me me may may may may maaaaaahhhhhh” five additional times, only now add an upward inflection at the end of the phrase.

**B. Susan Berkley Vocal Exercise**

A top voiceover artist and author of *The Voice Coach*, Susan Berkley developed the following vocal warm up designed to work many of the vowel and consonant sounds in the English language. Saying them properly can actually strengthen your articulator muscles. Read each sentence aloud slowly, pronouncing each word as carefully and properly as you can. As these are not tongue twisters, speed is not important.

- Eat each green pea. Aim straight at the game. Ed said get ready.
- It is in Italy. I tried my kite. Oaks grow slowly.
- Father was calm as he threw the bomb on the dock.
- An awed audience applauded Claude.
- Go slow Joe, you're stepping on my toe.
- Sauce makes the goose more succulent.
- Up the bluff, Bud runs with the cup of love.
- Red led men to the heifer that fell in the dell.
- Maimed animals may become mean.
- It's time to buy a nice limeade for a dime.
- Oil soils doilies.
- Flip a coin, Roy, you have a choice of oysters or poi.
- Sheep shears should be sharp.
- At her leisure, she used rouge to camouflage her features.
- There's your cue, the curfew is due.
- It was the student's duty to deliver the Tuesday newspaper.
- He feels keen as he schemes and dreams.
- Much of the flood comes under the hutch.
- Boots and shoes lose newness soon.
- Ruth was rude to the youthful recruit.
- Vivid, livid, vivifying. Vivid experiences were lived vicariously.
- Oddly, the ominous octopus remained calm.
- The pod will rot if left on the rock.
- Look, you could put your foot on the hood and push.
- Nat nailed the new sign on the door of the diner.
- Dale's dad died in the stampede for gold.
- Thoughtful thinkers think things through.
- Engineer Ethelbert wrecked the express at the end of Elm Street.



# CHAPTER 3

## Discovering Physical Actions

*"An actor becomes an actor when he masters the choice of actions."*

**Constantin Stanislavski**

The discovery of actions is the first step in the physicalization of any character. Although your ultimate goal is truthful inner emotions, they cannot be obtained directly. In and of themselves, feelings are shapeless and vague. They are an end result. Therefore, you do not consider them at this point. Instead, you must focus on honest behavior. Remember in Chapter 1, we stated that you must create a character who "behaves logically in imaginary circumstances." Truth comes from within, but only your physical body can communicate your thoughts and feelings. Thus, the discovery of physical actions will serve as a launching pad for the beginning of your technique training.

At the end of Chapter 1, we gave you a hypothetical situation of having been cast as one of the star-crossed lovers in *Romeo and Juliet*. Suppose you are playing Juliet. Imagine arriving at your first rehearsal, both nervous and energized about the task that lies before you. You are about to embark upon a journey of creating a uniquely original interpretation of this girl living in another dimension. You may understand what is expected of you in the end, but where do you begin? How do you give life to Juliet's soul through your art? How do you discover her specific sequence of truthful actions that occurs throughout each scene? Where do you find her physical form? You begin with a careful study of the play's **given circumstances**, the unchangeable facts found in the text; they provide you with the basic raw material for creating your character's external form.

Arriving at this first rehearsal, you no doubt have read the script more carefully than you have ever read anything before. Shakespeare's words should have fueled your imagination, but now you face the problem of materializing Juliet's thoughts and feelings, of discovering her physical actions. The given circumstances found in the text provide you with much material to begin this process. From the script, you (the actor) know that "you" (the character) are a girl of thirteen. "Your" mother and nurse confirm this in Act I, Scene iii. "Come Lammas Eve at night shall she be fourteen." This is an unchangeable fact. "You" discover that "your" parents have arranged for "you" to marry a young count, Paris, who is kinsman of the Prince. There is no reason to doubt the accuracy of this information either. "You" know "you" are an only child. "Your" father verifies this when he says "That God had lent us but this only child...." "You" know "you" are a Capulet, and "you" come to realize that "you" have fallen in love with one of "your" family's mortal enemies. "Tis but thy name that is my enemy." All these facts, these given circumstances, are undeniable and unchanging.

Like many scripts, however, scores of details in the given circumstances in *Romeo and Juliet* are subject to interpretation. For example, Lady Capulet describes Paris as a young man "writ with beauty's pen." This is not factual information but merely "your" mother's perception of him. "Your" opinion of him may be quite the opposite. "You" may consider him to be arrogant, with sharp features, and void of humor. Similarly, certain details about your character may be only suggested or inferred. As an actor, you must make decisions about your portrayal by using Juliet's own words, as well as things that are said to or about her. You have many blanks to fill. For example, "you" know "you" come from a wealthy household. The lines infer that "you" have received a proper education—unlike most Italian girls living during the Renaissance. You can also deduce that "you" consider "yourself" to be a romantic who dreams of an idyllic love. Your decisions about Juliet's education and dreams of love are inferred in her lines as she first meets Romeo, "You kiss by th' book." From this small clue, you can surmise that "you" have never kissed a man. "You" have dreamed of love. "You" have read about it in the books, but "you" have never experienced it. In a later scene, "your" father, in a fit of rage, shouts that "you" are not fit to marry "so worthy a gentleman" as Paris. He calls you a "disobedient wretch" and refers to you as "a whining mammet." Lord Capulet's lines are part of the given circumstances, but they are delivered in an emotional tirade. They are subjective and delivered from his point of view at this particularly vulnerable moment. As the actor portraying Juliet, you must decide what information extracted from the dialogue is true and what is false, exaggerated, or twisted by someone else's subjective opinion.

As in real life, not all characters speak the truth. Like us, they look at their world subjectively. They have a unique point of view about every issue and every other person in the play. They bring with them certain beliefs, values, and prejudices. Your responsibility is to discover the truth as perceived by your character. After you have firmly established your character's point of view regarding "the facts" and understood their implications, you are ready to augment the circumstances with material drawn from your own

imagination. The latter aspect is significant because it is the technique from which actors place their distinctive interpretation on the role.

Creating a unique point of view is one of the most exhilarating facets of acting. Unfortunately, this excitement can seduce actors into rushing into that phase of their work before they have sufficiently completed their study of the script. Your character's behavior must always be firmly grounded in the perceived circumstances. "Let each actor give an honest reply to the question of what physical action he would undertake, how he would act (not feel, there should for heaven's sake be no question of feelings at this point) in the given circumstances created by the playwright," wrote Stanislavski in his book, *Creating a Role*. "When these physical actions have been clearly defined, all that remains for the actor to do is to execute them."

Your search for the given circumstances begins in the script, with a study of the dramatic elements of character, plot, place, and time. In most instances, the playwright uses these facts to tell you about your character. You must carefully study your character's words, her every action. Where and when do these physical actions occur? At a later point in the rehearsal process, the given circumstances will also include directorial choices, stage business, costumes, and scenic environment; but mastering these elements is an aspect of acting that will be discussed in a subsequent chapter. For now, let us focus on answering four questions: Who? What? Where? When?

Each of these four W's (we will add an essential fifth in the next chapter) asks questions to which you must find specific answers either in the text or in your imagination. Until these answers are clear, your acting, from simple exercises to complex characterizations, will be at best confusing and at worst meaningless. The answers to the W questions generate physical actions, and these actions, when clearly performed, communicate the circumstances of the play to the audience.

Your acceptance of the role of Juliet has committed you to act in the given circumstances of Shakespeare's play. She is a specific character created by a master dramatist. You will be expected to play her to the fullest extent that your experience and imagination enable you to understand the playwright's direction. You have no choice, of course, but to play her with your own body, your own voice. You must use your own past experiences and imagination to deliver appropriate live responses. It follows, then, that in seeking to discover the physical life of young Juliet, you must always find a logical sequence of actions you can understand, that you can *believe* are *necessary*. Again, the vital question is, "What would I do if I were this character in these circumstances?" To ask only "What would I (the actor) do in these circumstances?" inevitably means that you play only yourself rather than the young woman drawn by Shakespeare.

In creating a role, you must use the four W's to trigger your imagination, and by opening night, these given circumstances will be rooted in your psyche. You will not have to think about these questions. "You" will simply know who "you" are, where "you" are, and when this sequence of actions (the what) is taking place. At this point, you will only consider the **moment before** (where "you" have been and what has occurred) and "your" reason

**FIGURE 3.1**

Darius Frye in a scene from The University of Memphis Department of Theatre and Dance's production of *Talk Radio*. Directed by Nicolas Crisafulli; costume design by Caren E. Carson; lighting design by John McFadden; scenic design by Rick Mayfield. A complete investigation of the given circumstances gives this actor the resources to develop an imaginative and yet grounded character in this Eric Bogosian play.

for entering this new space. Well before you arrive at this point, however, you must answer each of the four major questions and all the subsidiary questions precisely and fully.

It is not sufficient for an actor in Act I, Scene i of Neil Simon's *Biloxi Blues* to answer the "Where?" question with "on a train." A more satisfactory initial response would be "an overcrowded and stifling coach of an old train, pressed into service because of World War II." The actors playing Jerry and Peter in *The Zoo Story* cannot sufficiently stimulate their imaginations by thinking of themselves as "in a park." They must concentrate on being "in Central Park, near 75th Street and Fifth Avenue in New York, about nine blocks north of the Central Park Zoo." As a young actor, however, you may never have experienced a long trip in a railroad car or visited Central Park. Nevertheless, it is still your responsibility to make the "Where?" as truthful and specific as possible. You have your whole life from which to draw, and you have no doubt experienced congested school bus trips that reeked of



junk food, foot odor, and other bodily emissions. You have enjoyed many excursions to a local park. You probably have vivid memories of playing with your dog or throwing a Frisbee®. You know the trees, the landscape, and the specific details of your favorite outdoor hideaway. You certainly have at least some understanding of life in a large city. By transferring these life experiences—added to proper analysis and research—you have the ability to create a stage environment that is equally specific and detailed.

The questions “What?” and “When?” demand the same specificity. What has happened previously? What has occurred the precise moment before? What is happening in the play right now? What are your character’s expectations? What is the year? The season? The day? The weather? At what time does “your” selected life begin? More importantly, how do the conditions discovered in the “When?” and “Where?” affect the “What?”

The “Who?” question must not merely trigger the preconceived—and usually stereotypical—notions of a lawyer, a cheerleader, or a prince, because these terms stand for an infinite variety of people. All lawyers are not the same any more than individual members of a cheerleading squad are the same. Prince Hamlet of tenth-century Denmark is vastly different from Prince Harry of early fifteenth-century England. “Who am I?” demands thorough investigation using all of your resources. In creating a **character autobiography**—more thoroughly discussed in Part II, Chapter 8, “Creating a Character”—you certainly must record your character’s list of experiences, relationships, and achievements. More important, however, you must explore your character’s dreams, fears, values, and spirituality. What is “your” present state of being? What are “you” wearing, and how does it affect “your” actions?

Perhaps the most important question you must ask yourself about “Who?” is “How do ‘I’ perceive myself?” Again, remember that actors cannot judge their characters if they are to wear their clothing and behave truthfully in the given circumstances. Prostitutes do not necessarily consider themselves amoral. On the contrary, they may regard themselves as extremely decent and honest people—although industrious and streetwise—who are stuck in extraordinary circumstances and must do what they can to survive. A mass murderer can justify his every action. Although we may consider Adolf Hitler to be one of the most evil men in history, Hitler professed himself to be the spiritual savior, the purifier of his race. He may have perceived himself as a charismatic leader who had the vision and means to accomplish his political and honorable goals. Judging characters—no matter how different they are from you—will only stifle the creative process. Actors who cannot or refuse to drop their own point of view and moral sensitivities regarding the character’s actions and beliefs will create nothing more than a hollow stereotype. Actors who only look at their characters from the outside will never have the ability to fully invest in truthful actions.

Without specific and detailed responses to all four W’s leading to plausible, consistent behavior, you—as well as the audience—will never *believe* in your character’s reality. However, the four W’s are not always equally important in every scene. Sometimes, for instance, logical actions growing out of “Who?” dominate the moment. For example, at the beginning of *A Streetcar*

*Named Desire*, when Blanche sneaks a drink before Stella comes home, she needs to dispose of the glass. An appropriate physical action selected by the actor speaks volumes about Blanche's character. In the original Broadway production, Jessica Tandy, standing in front of the kitchen sink, ignored the seemingly logical choice of rinsing out the glass. Rather, she shook it vigorously and replaced it in the cabinet. In this way, the preliminary picture the audience had probably formed of a delicate but fading southern belle was cracked, if not shattered. As you perform the exercises at the end of this chapter, try altering which of the W questions is dominant in the scene. Notice how each selection will offer a different range of physical choices.

Exploring your character's physical actions and building on your own live responses are important problems to be considered in later chapters. We are also postponing for the moment a thorough discussion of the actor's use of emotion, complying with Stanislavski's warning that "there should be no question of feelings at this point."

For now, we will simply state that emotions, of course, play a critical role in acting; however, they are unpredictable. You cannot act an emotion, nor can you call forth an emotional response at will. You must learn to begin with tangible and controllable physical actions. You cannot play happiness any more than you can play anger; however, you can at every performance carry out a series of actions whenever you will yourself to do so. What is more, because physical actions and internal emotion are inextricably linked, performing the needed actions in the given circumstances may bring forth the desired feeling. We will speak of this in greater detail at the beginning of the next chapter. But whether or not the physical actions generate an emotional response, the careful playing of them will realize the intention of the scene and accomplish the actor's primary responsibility. Success is not to be judged by whether emotion is aroused in the actor.

## COMMITTING YOURSELF TO ACTION

The preceding reference to the actor's *will* introduces you to one of your most valuable inner resources. So important is your *will*, or full commitment to your actions onstage, that it became the cornerstone of the teaching of one of the greatest twentieth-century American acting teachers, **Sanford Meisner**. He believed that the foundation of acting is the "reality of doing." Meisner's "reality of doing" is our will, our commitment to actions. In life, we don't pretend to get dressed in the morning. We actually put on our shirts, our pants, and our socks. We really tie our shoelaces. The stage is a secondary reality, a mirror to nature. However, you must invest as fully in your stage actions as you do in life. At the beginning of his acting classes, Meisner invariably asked his students to solve in their head a multiplication problem. "What is 931 times 18?" His students sat in silence. Some of them pretended to concentrate, while others attempted to answer the question. No one solved the problem. The correct answer is 16,758. The answer, however, is not important. What is important is your will to work out the problem.<sup>1</sup> In

attempting to solve your simple and complex problems onstage, you must always search for solutions that are subject to your will. You must find appropriate actions to which you can fully commit and that can be repeated and kept under control at every rehearsal and performance.

The will to action is one of your most powerful inner motive forces, both on the stage and off. Creativity is directly related to your complete investment in the physical life of your character. The strength of your desire to “do fully” determines how interesting your performance will be to yourself and, to a large extent, how remarkable it will be to your audience. Your commitment to your actions is effective only as long as those actions are directed toward logical activity, supported by the given circumstances, and meaningful to the character. Your activity must also be capable of motivating strong desire. There is no place either on the stage or in the rehearsal room for half-heartedness or indifference. Actors who pretend to drink, pretend to read a letter, pretend to smoke, or pretend to kiss will never arrive at “true emotions” onstage. Their actions will simply be false indications of the truth. You must learn to commit yourself without reservation to the purposeful acts of your character. Doing so, you will find that this personal commitment is one of the principal generators of feeling.



Photo courtesy of Missouri State University. Photo by Loyal Auterson

### FIGURE 3.2

Jason Goff and Megan Marra in a scene from Missouri State University's production of *A Lie of the Mind*. Directed by Kurt Heinlein; costume design by Daniel Henke II; lighting design by Felicia Hall; scenic design by Robert Little. Note the determination of will by both actors in this scene; also notice that through the arranged composition, the woman receives primary focus, while the man is in a power position.



Unfortunately, a dedication to strong will does not in itself sufficiently guarantee believability. You must also recognize that, through lack of knowledge or experience or imagination, you can fully commit to inappropriate speech patterns or illogical character choices that are unsupported by the given circumstances. The result will be a performance that is at odds with the play. For example, if you were born and raised in Massachusetts and have been cast as Annelle in Robert Harling's *Steel Magnolias*, it is illogical to maintain your strong New England dialect, ignoring the small-town Louisianan speech of your character. You must find both her obvious accent and subtle variations of language. Conversely, the playwright, Arthur Miller, does not specify a city or state for *All My Sons*, but he very clearly asserts in the text that the action takes place approximately 700 miles from New York City.

*Mother:* Why did he invite her here?

*Keller:* Why does that bother you?

*Mother:* She's been in New York three and a half years, why all of a sudden...?

*Keller:* Well, maybe ... maybe he just wanted to see her...

*Mother:* Nobody comes seven hundred miles "just to see."<sup>2</sup>

From the textual references and the type of successful business built by Joe Keller, we can safely deduce that the action takes place close to a smaller urban area. Therefore, your production may be set in Cincinnati, Indianapolis, Louisville, Charlotte, or another smaller city close to this 700-mile radius. If you are an actor who was raised in Dallas, it is irrational to ignore the dialectical differences in locale between Dallas and any of the aforementioned cities.

Strong commitment to proper action must not be confined to performance. You must practice this wholeheartedly in every classroom exercise. You must give your total being to your actions during every moment of every rehearsal. Such commitment is an important part of all creative talent.

## EXERCISE 3.1

## DISCOVERING ACTIONS

To illustrate what is meant by "exploring your inner resources" and "discovering physical actions," in Chapter 1, we talked about playing a young Russian princess or Romeo or Juliet. But these problems, involving knowledge of foreign customs or an understanding of what you would do in a scene of emotional crisis, are too complex for beginning practice, so we will start with a simpler exercise.

In the first act of *The Boys Next Door*, by Tom Griffin, the mentally challenged Lucien, dressed in a pair of worn pajamas and carrying a mop and a flashlight, cautiously enters the living room area of his apartment and calls for his roommates, Arnold and Norman, to tell them that he has trapped a rat under the toilet. Following some nervous banter about what to do with the rodent, the three men devise "an airtight plan" to "blind" the rat by turning off the lights. After that, Arnold instructs Lucien to shut the door—without letting him "know where you are." Thus, the rat will be forever ensnared in the lavatory. They extinguish the lights, but before



Lucien can close the door, the rat escapes the bathroom and scurries into the kitchen area. Confusion ensues, and they capture the rat with a pillow. Lucien, wild with excitement, pounds the cushion with his fists. They cautiously lift the pillow to “check him out.” After they determine he is dead, Lucien guardedly lifts the rat by the tail and carries him into the bathroom, where he flushes him down the toilet.

Here is an acting problem providing an opportunity to explore your inner resources for the purpose of finding the logical sequence of actions demanded by the given circumstances. If you had never been spooked by the emergence of an unexpected intruder (e.g., a mouse, squirrel, bird, or cockroach) in your home, it would be impossible for you to solve this problem until you had enlarged your experience. Fortunately, however, most everyone can identify with the irrational fear of having to apprehend such uninvited intruders, so it is relatively easy for you to find in your own experience what you would do if you were Lucien in this situation. This is a simple but very real acting problem.

In this exercise, you are playing the role of Lucien. Ignore the existence of “your” roommates and the context of the scene. Likewise, disregard the sex and mental capacity of your character and work on a sequence of actions until you can truly *believe* everything “you” do. Here, as in all succeeding exercises, choose your actions so they constitute a definite dramatic structure. This means they should have a *beginning* (acquainting the audience with the problem); *middle* (developing the problem); and *end* (resolving the problem). Each of these three structural elements should be played clearly and precisely. In the early exercises, the structure will be simple. Construct your sequence of actions as follows:

**The Beginning:** “Your” approach to the bathroom door in order to trap the rat.

**The Middle:** The rat’s escape and “your” subsequent chase, capture, and ultimate killing of the rat beneath a pillow.

**The End:** The lifting of the rat by the tail and exiting with him into the bathroom.

Plays are filled with situations like this one that require you to perform in such a way that you convince the audience you believe the actions you must undertake.

## BELIEVING YOUR ACTIONS

Several times already, beginning with the title of this book, we have referred to “believing your actions” or “creating a character in whom you can believe.” You must believe what you are doing. Your fundamental responsibility to the audience is to induce their belief in your actions. Thus, the objective of the preceding exercise is not to pretend you are wild with excitement; rather, it is to make yourself *believe your sequence of selected actions* as “you” try to capture the rat. Acting is literally a matter of make-believe, fueled by an attitude almost identical to that which comes naturally to children.

Children have the innate ability to create for themselves a set of circumstances very similar to those given to the actor by the dramatist. During play, a little girl may take on the persona of her Barbie® doll in various situations; a boy may pretend he is camping under the dining room table. With very little prompting, children have the ability to fully believe in their reality as a king, princess, soldier, fairy, Superman, or even a dog. They instinctively behave in whatever fashion their experience or imagination leads them to think is true to the imposed conditions.

The pleasure children receive from the game is in direct proportion to their ability to believe their actions. As the game wears thin and their belief decreases, they invent new circumstances to stimulate further action. One child may propose: "Let's make believe the king wasn't really hurt when he fell off his horse but was only pretending. He did it so the prince would feel sorry for him and help him fight the Black Knight." A whole new sequence of actions is justified, allowing the child and his playmates to continue the game with renewed belief.

Of course, the throne is actually their parents' dining chair. The king's crown is from a fast-food restaurant. The swords are plastic. When the game is over, the precious crown that has been guarded so carefully is kicked to one side of the living room floor. The children never think these things are real, yet while the game is on, they treat these **props** as if they were genuine.

It is the same for the actor. During the day, King Lear's robes hang limply on a hook in the dressing room, and the imperial crown lies unguarded on the prop table. But when the performance begins, if the actor playing Lear is to convince the audience he is every inch a king, he must believe in the circumstances given him by Shakespeare, by the director, and by the designers as thoroughly as he believes in the actual world around him. "No half-belief," as Michael Redgrave said. "Belief ... does not begin and end by an intellectual process, but ... is so deep-rooted that it fires each movement, echoes in each silence, and penetrates beyond 'the threshold of the subconscious,' where it becomes creative."<sup>3</sup>

We do not suggest the actor subject himself to a kind of hallucination that blurs his view of the surrounding reality and induces him to accept the pieces of glass in the crown as diamonds. The actor playing Lear knows that the life of the character he is playing lives only in the imagination, and, like the children, he knows that the crown and robes are not really adorned with priceless jewels. He knows, in short, that he is not actually King Lear. He is an actor, so toward all these things he says: "I will act as *if* they were real." And this conviction in the truth of his actions enables him to believe also in the *truth* (not the *reality*) of the costume.

Remember, only reality exists. As we stated in the first chapter, you cannot help but believe in the truth of reality. With the help of the "magic if," however, you can suspend your disbelief and enter into your character's world with more passion than you believe in your own reality. *If* is a word that can transform our thoughts. *If* allows us to transport ourselves into any situation. "If 'I' were in love..." "If 'I' won the lottery..." "If 'I' were on death row..." "If I were a tenth-century prince and my mother married my uncle not two months after the death of 'my' father." The word *if* is incredibly powerful. *If* gives us a sense



Photo courtesy of the USC School of Theatre

### FIGURE 3.3

Lindsey Garrett and Jesse Einstein in a scene from the University of Southern California School of Theatre's production of *Sing Me a Song to Swim*. Directed by O-Lan Jones; costume design by Emily Town; lighting design by David Fine; scenic design by Brittan Perham-MacWhorter. The simplest physical action of holding hands and really looking into each other's eyes induces the greatest feelings of belief for these actors.

of certainty about our new world. If the actor playing Lear loses his sense of truth, it will not be because the crown is not real but because he cannot believe his own actions in relation to it.

Learn this Stanislavski axiom well: *Concentration on your most simple physical actions will induce the greatest feelings of belief, and the sum total of your small actions is of vast significance to the whole play.*

When you learn to believe in the truth of your actions, sustaining that belief is a difficult and ever-present problem. You must work in front of an audience, surrounded by the inevitable distractions of a theatrical production. You must be able to summon your belief on cue whenever the moment to enter the stage arises. The slightest doubt as to the rightness or truth of what you or the other actors are doing is likely to upset you immediately. An actor playing Lear who treats his crown like the leather with hot-glued costume jewelry it really is can destroy the belief of everyone onstage, just as a cynical child can obliterate the game's magic by protesting they can't fight with



“plastic.” You may renew a wavering belief, just as the child does, by discovering new circumstances that will excite new actions.

## INCORPORATING IMPROVISATIONAL TECHNIQUE

All live theatre integrates a certain degree of **improvisation**, the spontaneous invention of lines and business without fixed text or actions. Actors lose their train of thought; entrances are missed; and electronic devices fail. This is the Murphy’s Law of theatre. There are no second chances onstage—just you and your partners standing metaphorically naked in front of an audience. This is why we say theatre is both exhilarating and dangerous. Improvisational skills help you walk this tightrope without a safety net in performance.

The ability to create through improvisational choices also plays a vital role in rehearsals. Throughout the process of creation, your job is to make strong choices. After your character becomes rooted in your subconscious, rehearsals involve decision making. Every time you work a scene, you are playing your character’s objectives through an investigation of tactical choices while working against obstacles. (This is the primary focus of the next chapter and the core of all subsequent exercises.)

Improvisation as a method of learning, rehearsing, and performing has dominated actor training during the past several decades. Much of the theory underpinning this approach grows out of the research on games and play conducted by psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, and theatrical pioneers such as Viola Spolin. The charm and indeed the value of the method lie in its ability to tap into your natural propensity to pretend, to make believe, to create, and to perform in a game of the imagination.

Improvisational technique training enhances your natural instincts as an actor. As in life, you are reacting to ever-changing external stimuli onstage. Your performance and the production, although painstakingly rehearsed, changes slightly each night. A new audience, with different views, moods, and expectations, fill the seats. You know who “you” are, but each time you walk onto the stage, your manner of delivering your lines and actions varies to some extent. No two kisses are identical. The way in which you physically touch your partner tonight is different from last night. The way he looks at you is modified to meet tonight’s changing circumstances. Every line and action incorporates minor adjustments with each new performance. The literal connection between you, your partners, and the audience is as ephemeral as life. In portraying a role, you may think you know what is to come. You know your cues; you know your next line. You have rehearsed and performed the play countless times. Again, theatrical reality is planned. As in life, however, you—both as an actor and a character—never *really* know what will happen next. Therefore, while onstage, you must have the ability to adapt to changing conditions. This is where improvisation plays a vital role in your training.

Life is unstructured and transient. As we go through each day, we rely on our intellect and intuition, our natural impulses in response to stimuli. In reality, everything happens for the first time because it *is* the first time. Similarly, great actors onstage never lose their ability to give an honest and spontaneous reaction to familiar stimuli. With strong improvisational skills, you will never lose the ability to approach each thought and action as *if* it were happening





Photo courtesy of The University of Oklahoma School of Musical Theatre.

### FIGURE 3.4

A scene from The University of Oklahoma School of Musical Theatre's production of *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. Directed by Shawn Churchman. Training in improvisation frees the actors in this scene to make strong and creative choices.

for the first time. This is our illusion. This is our greatest freedom. What better objective for a student who would learn the art of the actor?

Improvisational exercises retain the quality of a game because their performance situation is not controlled by a playwright's words or a director's movement scheme. You are given the bare parameters of a situation and are left to perform the actions suggested by your physical involvement in the moment. Do not be fooled, however, for improvisation requires you to develop the given circumstances prior to and as the scene unfolds. Like everything related to acting, an improvisation must provide you with precise objectives that you must decide to accomplish in a specific way.

You must develop a sense of personal freedom and self-expression during improvisational exercises. There is no right or wrong way to perform your actions. However, before you begin the improvisation, try to bring yourself into the psychophysical state in the circumstances you have built. Do not attempt to be anyone but yourself in these initial improvisations, although you will be yourself in different circumstances: a parent, a child, an athlete, a politician. Each improvisation must have a beginning, middle, and end, and it is sometimes easier if you begin the scene with an entrance and end with an exit. Some improvisations—particularly those executed by the solo performer—should be performed without the need to speak. Do not attempt to explain your actions to your audience through indicated or false dialogue, and do not pretend to talk to a nonexistent person at this early stage in your training. But keep in mind that people do sometimes sing to themselves or speak aloud in fragmented ways—sighs, grunts,

partial sentences, or expletives—when the situation requires them to do so. Finally, do not choose any actions that cannot be played fully in your acting classroom, such as opening or closing doors or windows that do not exist. In fact, avoid pantomimed actions altogether. Use only real objects and bestow upon them the physical and psychological properties that will help you to believe in their reality. Your instructor serves as the master of the game. You bring your own insight, imagination, and experience to performing the actions; because they are your own, they cannot be known until you discover them and create them for your audience.

## EXERCISE 3.2

### IMPROVISING SIMPLE TASKS

As an introduction to improvisation, perform an imaginary scene using one of the words from the following list as the basis of your actions. Remember, the scene must adhere to the instructions explained in the preceding paragraphs. Play yourself in a solitary situation, but ask yourself the four W questions, just as you would if you were preparing a role from a play. Your instructor will help provide the given circumstances of the scene.

- **Dressing** (e.g., for bed, for a special occasion, for work)
- **Waiting** (e.g., at a dangerous subway stop, at home, at the airport, in a ticket line)
- **Searching** (e.g., for a lost object, a telephone number, a word in the dictionary)
- **Sitting outdoors** (e.g., at the beach, in the woods, in the park)
- **Reading** (e.g., a textbook, a “Dear John” letter, a romance novel)
- **Packing** (e.g., to go on vacation, to move to a new home, to run away)
- **Hiding** (e.g., from a stranger, from a friend)
- **Stealing** (e.g., in a department store, in a friend’s home)
- **Exercising** (e.g., in a gym, at the beach, at home)
- **Any other simple task**

## EXERCISE 3.3

### RECALLING A SPECIAL MEMORY

Continuing with the same activity used in Exercise 3.2, now assume someone is sitting, standing, or lying directly in front of you. You may define this person as your boyfriend, girlfriend, lover, confidant, parent, sibling, psychiatrist, BFF, or any other trusted person. Now you must find a reason to share a special memory from your childhood or teenage years with your partner. Recall a moment of great jubilation or defeat, a confession, a birthday, a vacation, a first kiss, the time you got caught cheating on a math test, or a long-held secret. As you speak, try to remain fully engaged in your activity.

## MAKING A SCORE OF PHYSICAL ACTIONS

Early in your training, you need to master a dependable method of working that will not only guide your study but also yield practical results. Some would-be actors have a notion that practical effort, especially if it involves

the use of pencil and paper, dampens spontaneity and hampers creativity. This notion is ill-founded. Inspiration comes from conscious technical effort; talent that cannot be nourished by hard, no-nonsense work has little chance of succeeding. Writing down thoughts stimulates further thinking, and practice carried on in the imagination can provide a solid theoretical foundation for a method of working that will sustain you throughout your career.

You now know how to discover the physical actions for your character in a given scene. After you have done so (and this does require pencil and paper), you should list your actions in order. Your list (and don't be afraid to number them) should form a sequence that is logical and appropriate for the character in the situation, and each action should be such that you are psychologically and physically capable of carrying it out. Your list for the following exercises should be relatively short and not excessively detailed because it will not be practical unless you can keep it easily in mind. It should, on the other hand, be complete, with no gaps that make it difficult for you to go from one action to the next. Your imagination, stimulated by the given circumstances, will provide the necessary strong desire to accomplish the sequence.

Making this list is the first step in a practical technique that Stanislavski called **scoring**. It is just a beginning because much of the remainder of this book is devoted to finding ways of expanding and deepening your score. When completed, your score becomes a comprehensive working design of your role and includes your physical and psychological actions, your major and minor objectives, images, subtext, and line readings. Scoring a role provides three advantages:

1. The preparation of the score forces you to dig deeply into the play and into yourself.
2. Adding to the score during rehearsal keeps you alert to the stimulation of the director and the other actors.
3. The existence of the score makes it possible for you to review your creative effort whenever the need arises.

Your score begins with a simple list of actions. You will practice deriving such lists when you get to the problems in Exercise 3.5. The following is an example.

Set in the urban wasteland of North Philadelphia, *Orphans*, by Lyle Kessler, follows the plight of two brothers clinging desperately to the notion of family. Treat, a rage-filled petty thief, supports himself and his younger brother Phillip by stealing wallets and jewelry. Phillip, agoraphobic and profoundly naïve, spends his days in their cluttered old row house watching television, eating mayonnaise out of the jar, and hiding in a closet filled with his long-dead mother's coats. In the opening sequence of the play, Treat, out of breath, enters from outside. He blocks the door and looks out the window down the street to see if he has been followed. Relaxing, he snaps his fingers, surveys the living room, empties his pockets, and then searches for Phillip.

#### The Beginning: "Ollie Ollie Oxen Free"

1. Quickly enter from outside.
2. Lean against inside of door to catch breath.
3. Laugh.

4. Look out the window down the street.
5. Place board against underside of doorknob to serve as a lock.
6. Snap fingers, and survey the living room.

#### The Middle: “Inspecting the Booty”

7. Cross to sofa.
8. Empty pockets of bracelets, wallets, rings, watches, and so on onto the coffee table.
9. Sit.
10. Inspect most expensive piece of jewelry.
11. See empty mayonnaise jar.
12. Take out butter knife and discard on table.
13. Pick up old biscuit on coffee table and shove in mouth.
14. Cross to trashcan, and discard empty jar.
15. Hear noise.

#### The End: “Hide and Seek”

16. Cross toward closet.
17. Bang on wall, calling for brother.
18. Slowly open door, peering through collection of mother’s coats on hangers.
19. Pick up stuffed animal.
20. Examine the room.
21. Quickly cross to pile of boxes, clothes, magazines, and so on, and knock them over.
22. Cross back to window, and look out to see if Phillip is outside.
23. Hear breathing.
24. Slowly turn and see Phillip hiding behind pile on stairwell.

Just as in Exercise 3.1, this score has been divided into structural units—a beginning, a middle, and an end—that give the exercise form, clarity, and dramatic interest. Also, each of the units has been given a name suggestive of the essential quality and the basic reason for the series of actions. In this case, the titles reflect children’s games. Choosing an appropriate name for each part of the structure is an extremely helpful technique because it unifies the actions and helps you understand the proper attitude. It also helps establish suitable relationships with the objects you are handling and with other characters in the exercise or scene.

Although the parts of the score should be closely related, progressing logically and inevitably from one to the other, you must clearly make a *transition* from one part to the next. Clear transitions bring each unit of the score to a definite terminal point and start the new unit with a firmly positive attack, a new impulse manifesting itself in movement, gesture, or speech. Terminal points and new attacks make the structure evident and give both you and the audience a sense that the play is moving forward.

The beginning, middle, and end of a score of physical actions are not arbitrary but represent distinct components of the overall action. For example, the routine of the beginning must come to a complete end (terminal point) before the action of the middle can commence. The conclusion of an action such



as “snapping fingers and surveying the living room” results in an instant of stasis, a momentary vacuum, a transition from which comes a strong impulse for new action—crossing to the sofa to examine the loot. Recognizing the terminal point of an action is essential to building a score of actions, and pushing off or attacking a new task gives actors an opportunity to reinforce their belief in the human actions they are reproducing.

A sequence of individual actions can be distinguished further because each action is influenced by the speed or pace of its environment (*tempo*) and by the internal performance pattern of the character (*rhythm*). Environmental influences are almost limitless, but some predominant sources of tempo are the prevailing mood, the weather, and other external circumstances, and even (or often especially) such artistic considerations as the placement of the action within a scene. The major sources of rhythm are within the character, and deciding on their rhythmic range is a consequential choice for the actors.

Life rhythms are extraordinarily important. The widely popular stage production *Stomp* is based primarily on our daily routines and rhythms. As in life, you must have a clear understanding of and feeling for your character’s internal rhythms. “All human activity follows some rhythmic pattern, which can be felt by the actor and expressed physically,” writes Mel Gordon in *The Stanislavsky Technique: Russia*. “Every stage movement should be conceived in Rhythm. Also, each character has a private Rhythm. Finding the character’s Rhythm is an essential key to discovering his personality.”

After a character’s rhythm is discovered, combining it with the proper tempo is a subtle process, yet one at which experienced actors often seem to be intuitively right. When actors correctly sense what their characters are saying and doing onstage, correct tempo-rhythms are likely to come without conscious effort. In learning a technique, however, it is usually necessary to make a *conscious* effort before mastery of the technique produces *unconscious* results.

Because the two are so closely related, Stanislavski used the term **tempo-rhythm** to designate the combined rhythmic flow and the speed of execution of the physical action (including speech) in a given scene. Tempo-rhythms have a natural appeal to both actor and audience—an almost magical power to affect one’s inner mood. This power is, of course, most evident in music. Recall the different moods created by your responses to swing music, rap, ragtime, R&B, and country music. The popularity of rock is primarily a result of the effect of its pervasive tempo-rhythm.

In the exercise from *Orphans*, make clear transitions between the units by using the technique of terminal points and new attacks. Then experiment until you find an effective and distinct tempo-rhythm for each action. Be conscious of how it changes as you move from the actions of one unit to those of the next. The tempo-rhythm may even change within a single passage. For example, in the sequence from *Orphans*, Treat’s initial tempo-rhythm is dominated by a combination of the rhythm the actor chooses for his character as it is affected by the tempo of the circumstances of the scene—he fears he may have been followed. If Treat were to see anyone as he looks out the window, the tempo-rhythm would change even if the activity he was performing had not been completed. A major change in the external circumstance produces a major change in the tempo-rhythm.

Photo by Karl Hugh. Copyright Utah Shakespearean Festival.



### FIGURE 3.5

Michael Brusaco (*left*) as Victor Prynne and Katie Whetsell as Sibyl Chase in the Utah Shakespearean Festival's 2009 production of *Private Lives*. By working off each other, the actors in this scene establish a comedic tempo-rhythm. Also note that Mr. Brusaco is giving focus to Ms. Whetsell, but he remains in the power position.

Tempo-rhythm is applied ordinarily to the basic flow and speed of execution in each individual unit rather than to whole scenes of a play. In a sense, a scene's various tempo-rhythms add up to its overall pace. Scenes

tend to have a pace that remains constant. The term *pace* refers to the speed at which the actors speak their lines, pick up their cues, and perform their actions.

To pick up cues does not imply that actors should race through a passage or scene. Usually, a director asks actors to pick up their cues to avoid the continual “line-pause-line” syndrome so common among new actors. In real life, our communication with each other has a flow, and our silences have a significance that a dramatist can only hint at in transferring the spoken word to the written page. Actors then translate the playwright’s words back into the sounds and silences of real speech.

## EXERCISE 3.4

## PRACTICE SCORES

Using the score from *Orphans* detailed above or one of the two additional scores described below, rehearse and present one of these acting sequences in class. Remember, scores evolve in the rehearsal process. You may present your selected score exactly as written, or you may modify through new rehearsal discoveries.

The first of these scores comes from Adam Rapp’s *Stone Cold Dead Serious*. Shaylee, a teenage runaway, sneaks into her parent’s home searching for money and material goods to steal. She is seventeen, pretty but sickly looking. She limps from a recent injury. Wearing old jogging pants rolled down at the waist and old running shoes, she carries a bag that contains the few fragmented parts of her life.

### The Beginning: “The Return”

1. Quietly cross to front door.
2. Look in through glass panel to see if coast is clear.
3. Stick key in lock and try to turn.
4. Unsuccessful, jiggle doorknob.
5. Cross to window, checking to see if it is locked.
6. Lift window and quietly crawl through.

### The Middle: “Pillaging”

7. Notice rank smell in room.
8. Inspect for possible loot.
9. Run upstairs to see if anyone is home.
10. Return downstairs.
11. Cross to counter piled with pill bottles, alcohol, mail, and so on.
12. Study labels on bottles.
13. Take several pills, chasing with long drink of liquor.
14. Investigate block of knives.
15. Remove small paring knife, placing it in bag.
16. Cross to other shelving unit and rummage through stuff.
17. Place anything of potential value in bag.

**The Ending: “The Prodigal Sister”**

18. Hear noise from other room.
19. Look to see who is coming. (It is her brother, Wynne.)
20. Stop searching and calmly zip up bag.
21. Cross back to counter.
22. Grab glass.
23. Blow out dust and pour drink.
24. Sit on stool and wait for brother’s entrance.

The next example represents a single score from a duet scene for a female and male, although the score is specifically for the female partner. When presenting the scene, however, the male actor must create a complementary score from a different perspective.

In *The Split Decision*, by William Moseley, Ginger, a free-spirited and energetic 26-year-old employee at Krispy Kreme Donuts, lives with her boyfriend, David, a young man absorbed in his work as a computer programmer. After five years together, Ginger desperately wants a commitment from David, who no longer seems to notice her. At the top of the scene, Ginger dances by herself to an upbeat song in her attempt to distract her boyfriend, luring him away from his laptop computer. Wearing sweat bottoms and two layers on top, she sings loudly to the music throughout.

**The Beginning: “In the Mood”**

1. At stereo, turn on loud dance music.
2. Spin and move to music, while looking at David.
3. Dance to kitchen counter.
4. Pour two glasses of wine.
5. Dance around counter toward kitchen chair.
6. Pull new skirt from shopping bag.
7. Dancing with skirt, cross to David on sofa.

**The Middle: “Distraction”**

8. Standing directly in front of boyfriend, remove top outer layer.
9. Toss shirt playfully into air over shoulder.
10. Still dancing, slide sweat bottoms down legs.
11. Fall onto sofa while removing bottoms.
12. Slide skirt up legs while standing on sofa behind David.
13. Mischievously run fingers through his hair. (He smiles but doesn’t reciprocate.)
14. Dance and spin over to full-length mirror.
15. Sing to self in mirror.
16. Playfully adjust breasts.
17. Turn to side, checking out new shorts.
18. Impulsively drop to floor.
19. Dance back up.
20. Wink and smile in mirror.



**The End: "Commitment?"**

21. Dance back to counter.
22. Grab both glasses of wine.
23. Dance over to sofa.
24. Close David's laptop, placing it on coffee table.
25. Grab his hand and pull him to open area below coffee table.
26. Pick up glasses, giving one to David.
27. Turn back toward boyfriend, dancing down and up his body.
28. Pull him toward bedroom. (He releases grip, picks up computer, and sits back on sofa.)
29. Stop dancing, staring at him in disgust.
30. Angrily cross to stereo.
31. Turn music off.

**EXERCISE 3.5****CREATING SCORES FROM SCENARIOS**

Make and perform scores for several of the suggested problems listed at the end of this exercise. Use pencil and paper. *Write them out.* Remember that a score is a sequence of physical actions constituting logical and appropriate behavior in particular circumstances. Make the circumstances specific; find definite answers to the questions of *who*, *what*, *where*, and *when*. Choose actions that will communicate your meaning to an audience; that is, do not develop a habit of acting only for your own benefit. Your score should designate the beginning, the middle, and the end, and each of these units should have a suitable name.

After you make the score, plan a simple arrangement of exits, windows, furniture, and whatever you need for the action, but let your imagination create as much detail in the environment as possible. Note that this detail provides a rich source for discovering physical actions. Give yourself actual or substitute objects (magazines, coffee cups, and so on); do not try to pantomime nonexistent props. Because you are working by yourself in this exercise, do not invent unnecessary dialogue. Use speech or sound only as necessary to call out or to release inner responses. Do not try to feel emotion. Do not try to be dramatic. Simplicity is one of the first (and one of the hardest) things to learn. All of these "do nots" should make you aware that actors always work within a set of prescribed limitations. Only after boundaries have been established can freedom be achieved.

Note the difference between this carefully planned improvisation and the spontaneous exercise suggested before. Perform each score many times. Technique is developed through repetition, and each repetition should stimulate your imagination to greater belief. It is not necessary in these exercises to realize all the circumstances of the play; rather, the situations described should stimulate you to provide circumstances from your imagination.

- A. In *Doubt*, by John Patrick Shanley, Sister James, a young, soft-spoken nun and teacher at a Catholic grade school, notices Father Flynn giving one of the young boys special attention between classes. After the young boy heads off to his next class, Sister James then watches the priest put something into the boy's locker. Waiting for him to exit, she goes to the locker, finding what appears to be a boy's undershirt.
- B. In Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*, Mick, a young man, sits alone on a bed. He looks at each object in the sparsely decorated room before he stares at the ceiling and at a hanging bucket collecting rainwater from a crack in the ceiling. He sits still for a long moment before hearing a bang at the door and muffled voices. Mick turns to look at the door and quietly moves toward it.
- C. Eugene O'Neill's *Anna Christie* tells the story of a former prostitute who falls in love with a barge crewman but has trouble turning her life around. Following the climactic moment when Anna has just revealed her past to both her father, the vessel's captain, and the man she now loves, Anna sits alone in a room contemplating her decision to stay or return to her former life.
- D. Martin McDonagh's dark comedy, *Pillowman*, centers on Katurian, a writer in an unnamed totalitarian state who is being interrogated about the gruesome content of his short stories and their similarities to a series of child murders. In this scene, Michal, Katurian's brother who is "slow to get things," sits in a jail cell listening to the screams of his brother being tortured in the next room. He is bored and has an "itchy butt."
- E. In Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Rose, a simple-minded young woman, returns home after several hours of picking berries. Feigning illness, she informed her sister she wanted to return home to rest. However, she slipped away to secretly rendezvous with a young man. In this scene, Rose returns home from her encounter carrying a red poppy. She is wearing her good shoes and skirt, but they have been soiled and wrinkled. Lethargically crossing through the family's garden, she sees her sister's cans of fruit. After a moment, she decides to sample the contents before entering the house to confront her worried family.
- F. In *Barefoot in the Park*, by Neil Simon, Corie, an energetic, young newlywed, enters an unfurnished apartment holding a bouquet of flowers. She looks around the room and sighs. After examining the room, she fills a paint can with water for the flowers, throwing the wrapping on the floor. She searches for an appropriate place to put the arrangement.
- G. In Stephen Adly Guirgis's comedy, *Our Lady of 121st Street*, Rooftop, a popular Los Angeles DJ, has returned to New York for the funeral of a nun who was a much beloved teacher at a Catholic school. While waiting in a nearby church for the police to solve the mystery of the missing body, Rooftop decides to confess his many transgressions to God.

- H. On a sultry summer evening, Maggie, in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, by Tennessee Williams, charges into her bedroom from the supper table to assess the damage one of her nephews has done with a hot buttered biscuit to her pretty dress. She opens the curtains to allow more light in the room and decides to change her dress.
- I. In *Coastal Disturbances*, by Tina Howe, it is August, and Leo, a lifeguard, gets ready for a day's work by doing his stretching exercises, standing in the sand by his lifeguard's chair. Holly Dancer, a pretty young woman, comes to the beach. The pace of Leo's exercises varies as he tries to attract her attention.
- J. In *Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief*, by Paula Vogel, Emilia, an attendant to Desdemona and scullery maid, has been ordered to peel potatoes. As she pares the potatoes, she vents her resentment by gouging out eyes and stripping the skin from a potato as if flaying a certain mistress (Desdemona) alive. She then stops to contemplate a proposition offered to her by her mistress that would allow her to escape her husband and live a life of luxury. She begins to energetically, resolutely, and obediently slice the potatoes.
- K. In David Henry Hwang's *The Dance and the Railroad*, Lone, a twenty-year-old Chinese railroad worker, sits alone on a rock on top of a mountain. He rotates his head so that it twirls his ponytail like a fan. He then jumps to the ground and practices opera steps.
- L. In August Wilson's *Fences*, Corey, a young Marine corporal, enters his recently deceased father's yard carrying a duffel bag. He studies his surroundings before seeing Raynell, his father's illegitimate daughter. Keeping the posture of a military man, he slowly crosses to the sister he has never known.
- M. In Neil Simon's *Rumors*, Chris Gorman nervously paces around the living room of Charley and Myra Brock waiting for a doctor to return her call. The hostess is missing, while the host lays unconscious upstairs from an overdose of Valium and an unexplained gunshot wound to his ear, which appears to be an attempted suicide. With the other guests due to arrive any minute, Chris desperately needs a cigarette. She quit smoking six months ago.
- N. In *Fisher King*, by Don Nigro, Rudd, a young Union soldier, sits by his campfire one dark night toward the end of the American Civil War, alone in the dark woods, his gun apart, cleaning it. He has deserted his military unit in order to find and kill the person who had sex with his sister Bel on a pump organ in his father's revival tent. Hearing someone thrashing around in the bushes, he tries to put his gun back together as calmly and patiently as possible.
- O. In *Lu Ann Hampton Laverty Oberlander*, by Preston Jones, the teenaged Lu Ann is left alone in the living room of their modest, small-town Texas home after her mother leaves for work. She turns on the radio, dances to the country-and-western tunes it plays, sneaks a smoke from a cigarette her mother has discarded,



and then has to greet her brother and a stranger who arrive unexpectedly.

- P. In *Purlie Victorious*, by Ossie Davis, Purlie has involved Lutiebelle, a backwoods serving girl, in a scheme in which she will try to pass herself off as Purlie's educated and sophisticated Cousin Bee. After Lutiebelle examines the beautiful clothes Purlie has bought for her to wear—slips, hats, shoes, and nylon stockings—she picks up her own humble belongings and tries to escape.
- Q. In *When You Comin' Back, Red Ryder?*, by Mark Medoff, nineteen-year-old Red is alone finishing his night shift at a truck-stop restaurant in an out-of-the-way New Mexico town. He plays the jukebox, smokes, and reads a newspaper, but prepares to make Angel feel bad for being late when she comes to relieve him.
- R. In *Request Concert*, by Franz Xavier Kroetz, a woman comes home from work and goes about the specific and mundane details of her household chores. She seems to be “putting her house in order.” At the end, she commits suicide. (This scene could also be played by a male.)
- S. In *Summer and Smoke*, by Tennessee Williams, Alma is an intelligent, tensely sensitive girl who has developed an abnormally reserved attitude toward young men. On an autumn evening she walks in the park, realizing that her prudishness has been responsible for her losing a brilliant young doctor with whom she has been deeply in love for a long time. She drinks from the fountain and quiets her nerves by taking a relaxation pill. When an unknown young man appears, she decides to make up for her past mistakes by attempting to attract his attention.
- T. *The Diviners*, by Jim Leonard, Jr., takes place in a small Indiana town during the early 1930s. Buddy Layman is an innocent and vulnerable “idiot boy” who always refers to himself in the third person. Because of an intense fear of water, he refuses to bathe, causing his skin to itch, especially on his feet and legs. In this scene, Buddy is revealed creeping in the woods, bent low with one hand held out as he tries to befriend a small bird.
- U. In *Monster*, by Patty Jenkins, a homeless prostitute with blood running down her face enters a motel room after killing one of her “customers,” who beat, raped, and tried to murder her.
- V. *Family Scene*, by Ivette M. Ramirez, explores the tense relationships between a mother and two daughters. In this scene, Sophia, the twenty-year-old daughter angry at her sister's impending wedding, appears at the exterior kitchen door. She fumbles for the house key in her bag, drops it, tries the door and, finding it open, goes in. Looking at a plate of food on the counter, she tosses her handbag down, grabs the plate, pours herself a glass of milk, and sits at the table to eat.



# CHAPTER 4

## Defining Simple Objectives

*"All that concerns the actor is to create the artistic action."*

**Constantin Stanislavski**

Throughout his career, Stanislavski sought a deeper understanding of the mystery of inspiration onstage. Great actors, he observed, had the uncanny ability to present an inspired performance each and every night. But Stanislavski did not understand the source of their inspiration. How do great actors reach into the depths of their souls to play a role that demands extreme anguish, hate, or joy when they know that everything around them is a lie? The truthful communication of emotions is the actor's ultimate goal, for feelings lie at the core of theatre's existence. Yet actors cannot "play" emotions, which are ambiguous and uncontrollable. So how do brilliant performers apparently conjure them at will? While working with his Moscow Art Theatre company throughout the early part of the twentieth century, Stanislavski tried to get his actors to add humanity to their creations by revealing truthful feelings onstage. His early attempts were extraordinarily original and progressive, but, for Stanislavski, each experiment ended in utter disappointment. His actors' emotions, when forced by conscious will, seemed hollow and untruthful, false indications of reality. Undaunted, Stanislavski made it his mission to create a system that would allow any proficient actor to exert control over unwilling emotions. He set out to develop a method that would allow the actor to consciously and repeatedly uncover the source of his own creativity, the part of his being from where inspiration springs and passions are genuine. All this, he came to believe, could be attained by way of logical organic actions focused on simple objectives.

Although it is unclear whether Stanislavski had any direct contact with the famous Russian scientist Ivan Pavlov, their experiments investigating the

connection between internal experience and its external expression (conditioned response) coincided with one another. Both Stanislavski and Pavlov came to the conclusion that the body and soul are so closely attached that they stimulate and influence each other. Before that point in time, many scientists believed that the body and soul were separate entities with minimal effect on one another. These two men, however, demonstrated through scientific means that every feeling, every thought, every decision, every mental process is transmitted through the body and manifests itself through external expression. Their proven discoveries became a law of mental and physical unity within the central nervous system. Human behavior, in this new light, becomes a continuous, uninterrupted *psychophysical* process. Through this **psychophysical union** of body and mind, the actor can perform truthful physical actions, inevitably provoking appropriate emotional responses. By performing a score of physical actions, the actor can obtain logical emotions, thus giving him a better chance of achieving his ultimate goal of inner truth.

The discovery of a character's appropriate physical actions is a key component in uncovering a conscious means (actions) to the subconscious (thoughts and emotions). Beginning in 1935, Stanislavski began to refer to his new approach as the **Method of Physical Actions**—a breakthrough in acting training and his gift to all future actors. Stanislavski considered the expression “method of physical actions” conventional. “They are psychophysical actions, he used to say, but we call them physical to avoid philosophical debate,” wrote Vasili O. Toporkov. “Physical actions are concrete and material, they are easier to perceive and define; but they are closely connected with a person's typical attitudes and feelings.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, when an actor performs a purely physical act, he inevitably introduces elements of the emotional and psychic into the process of creation.

Stanislavski's Method of Physical Actions could be modified, even personalized, to fit every actor's changing needs and circumstances. It transcended time and place, thus ensuring its creative power in the twenty-first century and preventing it from degenerating into sterile conventions relevant only to his life and times. According to numerous reports, Stanislavski feared and fought against the stagnation of his discovery above all things. Like the very nature of theatre itself, his system was a living thing that must be adapted to various cultures in an ever-changing world.

At this point, however, we must define the difference between **physical action** and **physical movement**. Physical action—which may also be verbal—has purpose. It exists within the play's given circumstances and has a point. Whereas movement may be simple and devoid of impulse, action is stimulated by motive. Therefore, the question “What?” cannot exist without a parallel question, “Why?” According to Sonia Moore, “If you fulfill only the physical side of an action, it will be dead, and if you are interested only in the inner side, it will be equally dead. You are learning to involve your psychophysical process.”<sup>2</sup>

Through Stanislavski's Method of Physical Actions, we learn that the process of life itself may be reversed onstage. In life, an external stimulus triggers an appropriate internal feeling that manifests itself in external

expression. Onstage, the actor responds to a stimulus through external expression (action) that triggers a truthful internal feeling.

### Life

(Reality)

Stimulus → Internal Feeling → External Expression (Action)

### Stage

(Secondary Reality)

Stimulus → External Expression (Action) → Internal Feeling

Therefore, the Method of Physical Actions is the sum total of the relationship between your psychological and physical being—the psychophysical *union*. The stage is not a place of reality; otherwise, the actors playing Romeo and Juliet would actually have to kill themselves at the end of the play. The tragedy does not really occur; it is a secondary reality. However, playing the appropriate physical actions through the eyes of the character within the world of the play allows an actor to experience true emotion onstage without artificial means. Therefore, as a result of the psychophysical union, emotion is approached indirectly through the discovery of physical actions.

In Chapter 3, you learned that you begin the task of believing by making a score of appropriate physical actions and learning to perform them honestly. You have just learned that it is counterproductive to be concerned about how either you or the character “feels.” Even in scenes of tragedy, you must concern yourself with *actions* rather than *feelings*. The question never is, “How would I feel if I were this character in these circumstances?” but rather, “What would ‘I’ do?” You should now know how to make a score of actions as the very first interpretative step in performing any role. You know each action must follow another in a logical sequence. They must be truthful, and you must believe each action is what you would do *if* you were the character in the given situation. Now you will learn how to make actions purposeful.

All stage events must have purpose; they must serve some end beyond the accomplishment of unmotivated movement. Moment by moment, the intent or meaning or significance of the performance, both for the actor and for the audience, rarely lies in the action itself but in the purpose for which it is done. Even melodramatic actions such as loading a gun or mixing poison are not in themselves dramatic. We must know why, toward whom the lethal activity is directed. Clearly played for the right reasons, any number of simple, everyday actions—packing a suitcase, moving furniture, lying down on the floor—may be dramatic.

So, to the four W’s discussed in Chapter 3, we have now added a fifth: *Why*? Answering this question gives you a reason to carry out your sequence of physical actions. You can learn no lesson of greater significance. Any action performed without a compelling reason holds no dramatic interest for the audience.

Again, to discover “Why?” you look first in the dramatist’s text, the place where all analysis begins. A careful reading should provide explicit reasons for your score of physical actions. If not, or if these reasons are unclear,



Photo by Karl Hugh. Copyright Utah Shakespearean Festival.

#### FIGURE 4.1

Corliss Preston (*left*) as Puck and Michael Sharon as Oberon in the Utah Shakespearean Festival's 2005 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Although they have the same purpose, psychological action is more powerful than physical action in moving the plot forward. Also note the actors' mutual primary use of the fourth side.



you should follow the same procedure you followed with the other W's. You turn next to what is *implied* by the text. (During this step, the director usually becomes the chief interpreter for a particular production.) Finally, you solidify your decisions and personalize them by drawing on your own insight and imagination.

Knowing how to make action purposeful is among the most valuable of all acting techniques. It allows you to believe more strongly in what you are doing as the character. It gives you a reason for being on the stage and thus relieves your tension. Finally, it provides a principal means of conveying or communicating your character's story to the audience.

In this text, we call a character's purpose for carrying out a sequence of physical actions the **simple objective**, or *objective* for short. Others call it different names: intention, goal, motivation, desire, impulse, or intended victory. Stanislavski himself called it *zadacha*, which translates as *problem*, whereas Uta Hagen stated it as a question—"What are you fighting for?" "It has been called many things in many books, and some people don't call it anything; but it is a process that is going on, if they are really acting," wrote Robert Lewis. "I myself don't care if you call it spinach, if you know what it is, and do it, because it is one of the most important elements in acting."<sup>3</sup>

"Spinach" might prove confusing, but *objective* is a term commonly used by actors and directors. By definition, an objective is "a determination to act in a certain way or to do a certain thing." So let's agree that *action* will mean the sequence of physical actions, the *what*, and that *objective* will mean the reason for doing them, the *why*. Put simply, objective is what you want, what you are fighting to accomplish through your actions.

## STATING THE OBJECTIVE

Return to the exercises in Chapter 3, and extend them by carrying out your actions to satisfy a clearly stated, simple objective. This important step forces you to dig again into the circumstances. After you have found the objective by examining both what the playwright gives you and your own experience, it is important for you to state it in a form that compels you to execute a sequence of simple but psychologically motivated actions.

Here is the way it might work in the problem from *Orphans*. In Chapter 3, we made a score of physical actions and separated them into structural units, so now we will add this circumstance, discovered by studying the script: When Treat enters his home, he is out of breath from having been chased by one of his recent burglary victims. He blocks the door and looks out the window down the street to see if he has lost his pursuer. When he realizes the "coast is clear," he laughs, snaps his fingers, and crosses to the coffee table to survey his newly acquired property. In addition to the score of physical actions, we now have a psychologically motivated objective. Treat is apprehensive and exhilarated by the experience. Stealing is necessary for his brother's and his survival, but he also revels in the game. At the top of the scene, we state his objective as "I must secure my home turf before enjoying my winnings with my brother."

Stating and playing simple objectives in the problems from this exercise will be relatively easy. Mastering this early work will pave the way later for understanding the complex problem of *units of action* and *super-objectives*.

## EXERCISE 4.1

### REFINING YOUR SCORE

- A. Improvise the score of actions from *Orphans* with the objective "I must secure my home turf before enjoying my winnings with my brother." Keep the objective closely in mind throughout the presentation, and let your imagination work!
- B. Carry out the same actions, but modify your simple objective to "I must secure my home turf before teaching my brother a lesson about survival." Hold firmly to this slightly more menacing objective, even as the action turns from the pursuer to finding "your" brother. Use your imagination to justify this objective.

Let's look at two more examples of determining actions and objectives from a script. In *When You Comin' Back, Red Ryder?* by Mark Medoff, the setting is a diner in the desert of New Mexico in the late sixties or early seventies. Stephen/Red is a nineteen-year-old who wants to escape the mundane world and become as famous as his movie hero. Angel, the waitress, is a few years older and accepts her life. She has a crush on Stephen and wants him to stay. In the opening scene, the conversation is about coffee, their names, and coupons, but Stephen/Red's objective is "I want to steer Angel's attention away from me," and Angel's is "I must force Stephen to pay some attention to me." This scene has many actions to be played, including reading a newspaper, drinking coffee, and eating a donut.

*The Crucible*, by Arthur Miller, deals with the famous witchcraft trials in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692. The theme is the frightening effects of injustice and the misuse of authority. John Proctor, about thirty years of age, is a hard-working farmer of independent spirit. His wife Elizabeth, also about thirty, has discovered that John had an adulterous affair with Abigail, a girl who worked for them and has since been dismissed. Abigail is one of the children bringing charges of witchcraft against innocent people, including Elizabeth. Earlier, Abigail admitted to John that their allegations are not true. Elizabeth's Puritan ethic has magnified her husband's single infidelity into a situation of major proportions. At the opening of Act II, her objective is "I must compel John to go to Salem to expose and denounce Abigail." John's is: "To restore normality to my house, I must satisfy my wife's wishes."

## INCORPORATING ACTION VERBS

To make your character's actions personal and compelling, note carefully the way a simple objective is stated: "I wish ...," "I want to ...," or "I must ...," followed by an **action verb**. Common verbs such as running, leaving, reading,

fighting, or kissing may all be classified as action verbs in the grammatical sense; however, these verbs are dramatically *static*, an end in themselves. For you, the actor, action verbs must motivate a sequence of smaller actions. “To provoke,” “to belittle,” and “to protect” are examples of action verbs that stir the imagination and give rise to subsequent simple actions. You must even avoid the use of more complex **static verbs**. Take, for example, the word “power.” To say “I wish for power” is too general. Phrasing it as “What must I do to obtain power?” will move you more toward purposeful activity; however, the word “power” still remains too large and relatively inert. You cannot execute “your” need for power at once. Try playing a scene in which you wish for power in general. Stanislavski believed you must have something more concrete, real, nearer, more possible to do. Your chosen verbs must give you motivation for a succession of selected actions. This discussion may sound trivial to the beginning actor, but learning to identify the proper action verb is a necessary and learned skill.

After you possess the ability to articulate a good action verb, you instinctively surge forward with appropriate subsequent actions. Think always in terms of what you must *do* by way of action verbs, not in terms of what you want to *be*.

### Example 1

- Poorly phrased: “I am jealous of my colleague’s recent accomplishments.”
- Well phrased: “I must belittle my colleague’s accomplishments to make myself look better.”

### Example 2

- Poorly phrased: “I am frustrated by my friends’ dispute.”
- Well phrased: “I wish to negotiate a truce between my friends.”

Jealousy and frustration are states of being and cannot drive forward an objective, whereas “to belittle” and “to negotiate” stimulate specific activity.

You cannot summon an emotion at will, a point Stanislavski realized from the very beginning of his investigation into the subconscious. True emotions arise involuntarily in reaction to external and internal stimuli. Any attempt to consciously summon an artificial state of being will result in nothing more than indicated and meaningless movement, an external parody or cliché of a generalized emotion. Certainly, your state of being affects your choices as well as the tempo and rhythm of your selected actions, but emotions are the result. This is one of the most common mistakes made by young actors, attempting to act by *being* rather than *doing*. If you attempt to concentrate upon *being* drunk, *being* angry, *being* happy, *being* sad, or *being* afraid, you will certainly fail. Concern yourself, just as you do in reality, with what you would do in each situation, not with what you would be or how you would feel. Remember, through the Method of Physical Actions and as a result of the psychophysical union, the emotion will be there if the actions are carried out to the fullest extent of your will.



Photo courtesy of The University of Oklahoma School of Musical Theatre. Photo by Michael Mitra



## FIGURE 4.2

A scene from The University of Oklahoma School of Musical Theatre's production of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. Directed by Gabe Barre; lighting design by Steve Draheim. The actors in this scene work from a united simple objective that makes their actions personal and compelling.

## EXERCISE 4.2

### DOING VERSUS BEING

On your instructor's direction, perform the following sequence, allowing thirty to sixty seconds for each of the commands. Standing before the class, try to act excited. Now attempt to play anger. Make an effort to look sexy. Now try to relax. After a few minutes of this, most likely you will become frustrated or confused by the preceding directions. Now sit on a chair or sofa, and take off your shoes and socks. Rub your feet.

Acting excited, playing anger, looking sexy, and then trying to relax without a specific sequence of actions is almost impossible. When instructed to act excited, did you stand on your toes and artificially throw your arms in the air while spinning about? How do you relax in front of an audience who is watching your every move? You cannot simply *be* in a vacuum. Relaxation results from purposeful activity. You need to create a set of circumstances that justifies your feelings and then perform specific actions under these invented circumstances. The moment you were instructed to perform a specific sequence of actions—sitting



down, taking off your shoes and socks, and rubbing your feet—relaxation followed. Your nervousness over *being* in any of the aforementioned states probably disappeared. Rather than focusing on the audience and how you appeared to those watching you, you concentrated on your actions; thus, you “got out of your own head” and out of the realm of self-consciousness.

*Being* is a passive concept. Compare being excited versus the act of opening an unexpected gift. Weigh the idea of being angry versus shredding a piece of paper and stomping the fragments into a trashcan. Try to imagine being sexy versus mixing the perfect cocktail and then putting on your favorite CD. You can act the second half of the preceding phrases. On the other hand, if you are playing a state of being, your energy is directed inward toward your emotional center rather than outward toward acting in the dramatic situation. When you are angry, your mind does not focus on being angry. Rather, you are concerned with the cause—the person or thing that has made you angry—and you may deal with the cause in any number of ways. You may overlook it. You may seek release from your anger in some act of physical violence—shredding the paper and stomping on the fragments. You may plan some dreadful revenge. But certainly you are not saying to yourself, “I must be angry.” You *do* something about it. When you are frightened, you do not *want* to be afraid. Instead, you want to dispel your fear in some way. You may want to escape or to seek comfort from someone. You may want to calm your fears by turning your attention to something else. You may want to investigate the source of peril. As an actor, you must always place an emphasis on concrete details. Never try to act in general, and never attempt to convey a feeling such as love or hate in some vague, nebulous manner. In life, we express emotions in terms of specifics: A nervous man smokes a cigarette while fidgeting with his lighter; an angry woman slams the door on her fiancé and pulls a handkerchief from her purse to wipe her eyes; an anxious teenage girl quickly closes the window blinds and sits on the sofa clutching a pillow. Actors must find equally specific activities; otherwise, they will simply be feigning a generalized emotion.

You cannot act a state of being, an emotion, or a condition. If an unknowing director tells you, “In this scene, you are really angry. I want you to play the anger.” You will undoubtedly respond with, “Okay, but how do I do that? What do you want me to do?” This type of vague direction will simply leave you stuck scratching your head. What is anger, anyway? For that matter, what is happiness? What is depression? People have their own interpretation of these states of being, and we are never simply one particular emotion. At any given moment, we may be happy with our lives but anxious about a forthcoming presentation. At the same time, we are frustrated with our family and yet concerned about our child’s health. You may be a bit intoxicated from the wine you had at dinner, angry with the driver who cut in front of you on the freeway, and overjoyed about your

recent promotion. States of being are subjective and inconsistent, and they vary greatly depending on the circumstances. Trying to play a state of being will only lead you into stereotyped movements and gestures (e.g., clenching your fists to show your anger, putting your hand to your forehead to show you are being thoughtful, or contorting the muscles of your face to show your pain).

Burning your hand may *be* painful. But you want to *alleviate* the pain by applying salve, butter, cold water, or some other remedy. When an actor such as Al Pacino is pointed out in a crowd, you may *be* curious. But you want to *secure a position* where you can *see* and perhaps *get* his autograph. To be in pain or to be curious is not actable. But to relieve pain or to satisfy curiosity is. You can easily carry out the actions of applying a remedy to your burned hand or of working your way into a favorable position.

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## EXERCISE 4.3

## ACTION FROM AN EMOTIONAL STATE

To realize more fully the importance of *doing* rather than *being* and of stating your simple objective with an active verb, work carefully on the following problem. Choose a word from the list at the end of this exercise, and make it the basis for a series of actions. Do not let this instruction lead you into a trap. As you study the list, you should now realize that you cannot act any of these words. Each is an end result, an effect. You must imagine a circumstance providing a reason for the *action that will produce the effect*. Then forget the effect, and concentrate on carrying out the actions. For example, the following circumstance would provide an action for the word *cautious*: *You have just escaped from a war prison. In darkness, starved and exhausted, you are making your way across an area filled with booby traps. You find a knapsack that might contain rations.* State your objective as “I must work my way through the area without triggering a trap.”

The following circumstance would provide an action for the word *spiteful*: *You have not been getting along with your roommate. You resent your roommate’s continually asking to borrow money to satisfy an extravagant taste for clothes. You return home to find that your roommate has “borrowed” money that you were saving to buy a present for your fiancé. You take several articles of your roommate’s new clothing, cut off all the buttons, and put them in the box where your roommate keeps coins.* State your objective as “I must teach my roommate a lesson for being so selfish.”

Now, look over the list, and select a word. Devise appropriate circumstances. Make a score of your actions. State your simple objective. Structure your score, and name each of the three units. Carry it out in an imaginative sequence of actions. Observe the instructions given for the exercises in Chapter 3.

breathless	embarrassed	jealous
awkward	distracted	sickly
bewildered	bashful	grouchy
coarse	excited	panicky
drunken	frantic	tantalizing
genteel	exhausted	spiteful
maudlin	nervous	dazed
cautious	infuriated	ruthless
lethargic	terrified	jovial
violent	condescending	detached

Note: The preceding list is taken from playwrights' directions to actors in a single volume of modern American plays. They illustrate how dramatists (and often directors) ask for effects. Actors must be able to think of effects in terms of actions and objectives. A frequent comment to actors from directors is, "Don't play the effect [even though he may have just asked for it], play the action!"

## EXERCISE 4.4

### EVERYDAY ACTIONS

Choose one of the following "everyday" actions. Create circumstances, and provide an objective you can attack with unfeigned interest and excitement. Take, for example, polishing silver: You are in an antique shop in a foreign country. You discover among many dusty articles a blackened silver bowl that you think is the work of Benvenuto Cellini. Beneath the tarnish may be revealing marks. If you are right, the proprietor obviously does not suspect its origin. State your simple objective as "I must remove the tarnish from this bowl without attracting the proprietor's attention."

For another example, consider "walking five steps": You are in the hospital with a serious illness. You are very weak and short of breath. You are under strict doctor's orders to stay in bed. You decide to test your strength by walking a short distance to a chair. You reach the chair exhausted but convinced you are beginning to recover. State your intention as "I must regain the strength in my legs if I am ever to return to full health."

Now it is your turn. To solve the problem suggested by one of these "everyday actions," you need specific circumstances, a properly stated objective, a score of physical actions, and imagination. Execute all physical actions precisely, clearly, and with complete commitment. Avoid any activity that requires pantomime. Take your time. Give your actions form.



- reading a newspaper
- looking through a window
- opening a door
- hunting for a lost object
- writing a letter
- lying down on the floor
- applying or removing makeup
- arranging furniture
- getting dressed or undressed
- drinking alcohol or a soft drink
- examining a photograph
- wrapping or unwrapping a package
- crawling on your hands and knees
- packing a suitcase
- walking five steps
- examining a bundle of clothes
- waiting for someone
- stretching

Plays are filled with simple actions for which actors must find objectives that stimulate their imagination and make the actions communicate the playwright's meaning.

## WORKING AGAINST OBSTACLES

Obstacles are the foundation on which great dramas and comedies are built. Most plays center on a single character's overall objective, but there is no drama without something standing in the way of his achieving his goal. In every play, there is always something that the leading character wants but cannot have due to numerous obstacles, and the character's subsequent actions come about through his desire to overcome these barriers. Every moment you are onstage, "you" face at least one opposing objective. This opposition, whether stated or implied, creates conflict; it heightens the reality. For example, perhaps you are playing a character in a long-standing relationship, and "you" want to "take it to the next level." "You" decide to tell "your" girlfriend that "you" love her, but "you" are afraid. Perhaps "you" fear rejection. What if she doesn't share the same feelings? The moment "you" say "I love you," she might suggest that "maybe we should see other people."

Now assume you have created a character involved in a physically and emotionally abusive relationship. Fearing for "your" own mental health and perhaps even "your" life, "you" make the decision to leave "your" husband. In this scene, "you" intend to ask "your" husband for a divorce, but "you" find it incredibly difficult to do. Inexplicably, "you" still love him, although "you" fear him. "You" cannot imagine life without him. How will "you" survive financially? Maybe "your" religion doesn't recognize divorce. Perhaps he has threatened to kill "you" in the past. What about the well being of "your" children?

The interest in a play or scene lies in the possibilities it offers you to gain an objective against odds—odds sometimes so great that the struggle ends in defeat, either glorious or ignoble. The greater the obstacle, the more engaging the action will be to the audience. On the other hand, plays without conflict have little interest for either actor or audience. Conflict is basic to dramatic structure, just as it is fundamental to life. The degree to which your character



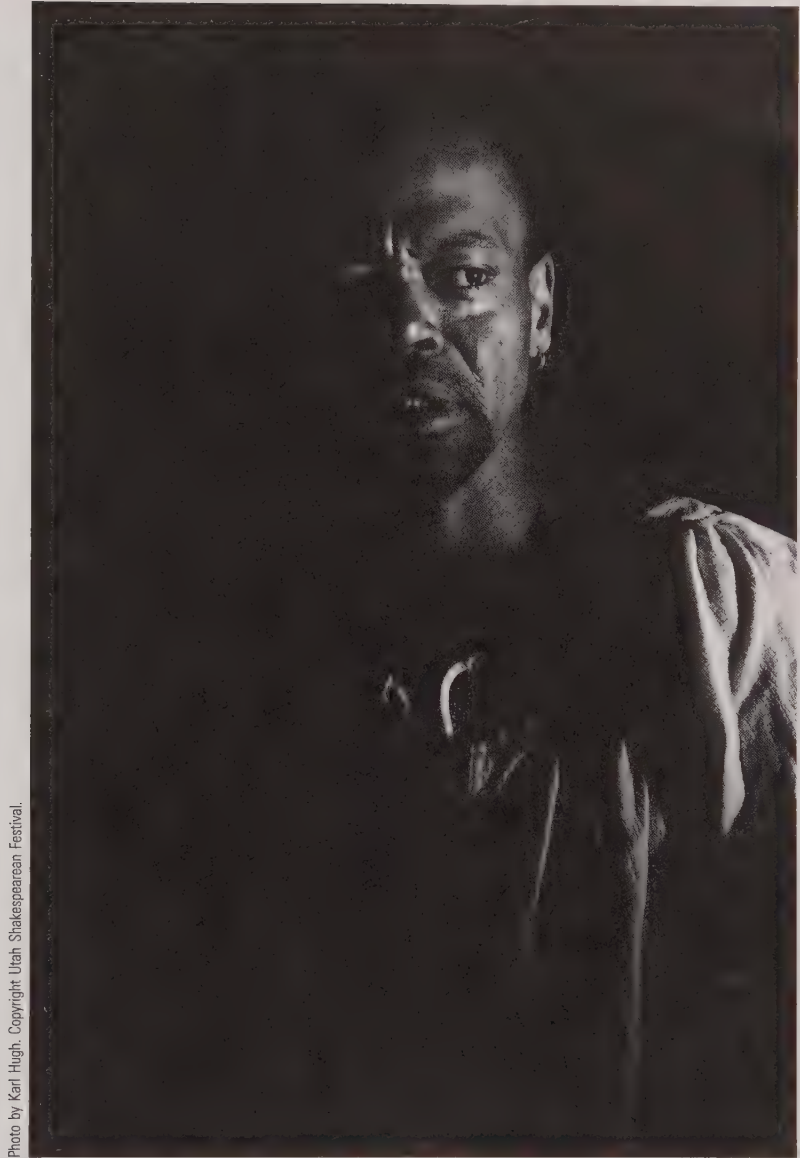


Photo by Karl Hugh. Copyright Utah Shakespearean Festival.

### FIGURE 4.3

Jonathan Earl Peck as Othello in the Utah Shakespearean Festival's 2008 production of *Othello*. In this scene, Othello clearly knows what he must do; however, he must overcome the powerful psychological forces working against him.

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overcomes her obstacles is the measure of her success in achieving her goal. And after your character achieves one simple objective, another is born, complete with a different set of barriers. This is the basis for drama, and the best scripts have the most interesting and complex obstacles.

## EXERCISE 4.5

## OPPOSING OBJECTIVES

The following improvisation requires two people, one male and one female. A young high school couple living in a small rural community has been in a relatively long-term and stable relationship. Right after graduation, the young man, who struggled with his grades throughout high school, plans to enter into his family's construction business, a fairly successful company he will someday inherit. The young woman, on the other hand, comes from a poor family. However, she excels academically, and unbeknownst to him, she has received a large scholarship to a prestigious university that will cover tuition, room, and board. It is late evening following their senior prom. They are alone in a car at "Lookout Point." The young man's objective is to tell his girlfriend for the first time that he is *in love* with her. He then intends to ask for her hand in marriage. The young woman really *likes* him, but her objective is to tell her boyfriend about her plans to leave this small town, go to college, and pursue her dream. For many weeks, she has deliberated her problem. Now that prom is over, she decides that tonight is the night to break up with him.

As you formulate each simple objective, ask "What is the *obstacle*?" or "What stands in my way of accomplishing my goal?" With no obstacle, there is no problem—no scene—no play! The obstacle, like the objective, may be internal or external. Internal obstacles always grow from the character's own personality and experience; external obstacles come from all other sources, such as family, societal expectations, religion, politics, nature, laws—even such natural phenomena as the weather and the time of day.

Obstacles may also be either physical or psychological, and frequently they are so closely related that it is not possible, or desirable, to separate them. For example, Patrick Myers' stunning play, *K2*, is a psychological drama of two characters in search of survival while physically stranded on the side of the world's second highest peak. Taylor Brooks and Harold "H" Jamieson are old friends, polar opposites temperamentally, who share a mutual, obsessive passion for the challenge of the climb. On a recent vacation, a planned ten-day trip on Mount McKinley, they barely escaped with their lives after an overhead jet created an avalanche. Regardless of the fact that two in their party died, the pair decides to scale K2, "the toughest mountain in the world" because "half of the people who go there don't come back." After a successful climb to the 28,250-foot summit, they begin their descent. At 27,000 feet, "H" falls on a sheet of ice and breaks his leg. When the play begins, they are stranded on a dangerous shelf, scared, with no rope, tent, or oxygen and just one can of chicken soup between them. There are many physical obstacles they must overcome: the mountain itself, the icy ledge to which they cling, the altitude and consequent lack of oxygen, the shortage of food and equipment, the blizzard weather conditions, and the broken leg. However, the physical

obstacles, daunting as they are, do not sustain the play. This is a psychological drama of survival—man against mountain. The mental obstructions facing these two men give the play texture, depth, and meaning. The physical and psychological are interrelated, but the conflict of one man's acceptance of the mountain and its death sentence versus the other's dogged determination to endure provides the greatest drama.

Onstage, as in life, your psychological objectives and obstacles stimulate your selected actions. Climbing a mountain is much more than just the act of overcoming the impending physical obstacles. When exhaustion sets in and the men face the other tangible impediments, the story becomes about will, mind over matter. A woman's recent accomplishment of navigating the globe on a one-person sailing vessel took great physical endurance, but overcoming the resulting psychological hurdles proved the real victory. In sports, a winner's motivation is nearly always psychological. A ball player does not want simply to outscore the opponent; rather, he is motivated by a desire to win, to bring honor and prestige to himself and to the team. Professional golfers require years of physical technique training. They must also have extraordinary hand-eye coordination, but golf is a mental sport requiring Zen-like coordination of mind and body. The act of physically conquering something, whether it is on the athletic field or in your everyday life, holds no dramatic interest without psychological barriers.

From the previous illustrations, we suggest you consider three important points. First, psychological objectives and obstacles can stimulate your imagination more strongly than physical objectives and obstacles can. Second, you must make a personal commitment to overcome the obstacle(s) and accomplish your objective. As you have seen with the Method of Physical Actions, this commitment generates true emotion. Third, you must feel the challenge physically as well as intellectually. A runner does not win a race by *wishing to*, *thinking* about strategy, or *feeling* victorious. Goals are achieved through purposeful *action*.

You must pay particular attention to the importance of obstacles. Your psychophysical actions, if they are to have any dramatic interest, must be performed to overcome an obstruction that exerts a strong force against the accomplishment of your simple objectives. You must not be indifferent to this opposition. Dispassion toward the challenge of overcoming obstacles, too common among student actors, will inevitably render a performance ineffective. An even more basic error occurs when actors fail to clearly identify their obstacles. Until you define your complications, you cannot discover what means the dramatist has provided, either directly or by implication, for overcoming them. You will then be deprived of the only true and defensible stimulus for drawing additional strategies from your imagination.



## EMPLOYING STRATEGY

According to the military definition, **strategy** is “the art and science of employing armed strength to meet the enemy in combat.” Although conflict between the character and the obstacle is not always open warfare, you would do well to conceive your whole performance as a strategic plan to overcome the forces working against your character. You are searching for the most interesting and provocative way to reveal your character by your line of attack. You must find a way to satisfy your character’s needs. To what extent are “you” willing to manipulate the world to get what “you” want? Employing strategy means to explore active choices in rehearsal. Learn what strategy works best for “you,” and make the stakes as great as possible.

Plays are about important moments in people’s lives. You must ask yourself the degree of importance. What are the consequences if “I” don’t get what “I” want? What lengths am “I” willing to go to obtain “my” objective? A barren young woman may be so desperate to have a child that she is willing to break into someone’s home to kidnap another woman’s baby. Her need is so great that she is willing to risk getting caught and possibly going to jail, thus sacrificing her own freedom. A love-struck young man may be so desperate to gain the affection of a girl that he is willing to make a fool of himself in a public place to demonstrate his feelings. As an actor, you must know to what depths “you” are willing to go to get what “you” want. The stakes must be high enough to make an impression on the audience, making us feel and care for your character. We must feel we are watching a life being lived in front of us. Not only must you know the stakes, but also you must make us feel the importance of your actions.

The depths of your character’s desire affect every strategic decision you make. We are guided by our desires; they are the involuntary urges our bodies feel to perform an action. Desire is your character’s emotional drive, a craving or ache to fulfill “your” real wants and wishes. The subject of a play generally centers on someone’s intense desire for such things as love, power, revenge, fame, glory, truth, spirituality, sexual pleasures, or self-preservation. How far are “you” willing to go to achieve “your” objectives? Would “you” sacrifice “your” pride and self-respect? Would “you” kill someone? Would “you” die? Would “you” steal, cheat, lie, or ruin someone else’s life?

Always attempt to simplify the conflict by finding your character’s elemental need; do not try to complicate it. For example, a year ago “your” husband took out a large life insurance policy on “you,” and recently “you” began hearing rumors that he has been having an affair with “your” best friend. Last week, “you” wrecked “your” car after someone cut the brake lines. “You” now have a frantic need to discover the truth about “your” husband. Are the rumors true? Is “your” life in danger, or were these events merely coincidental? If this sounds melodramatic, remember that such material is the stuff of which drama is made. The content of Shakespeare’s plays in the hands of a hack writer yields soap operas, and the Greek tragedies become second-rate horror movies. “Good drama, of whatever kind, has but one mainspring—the human being reduced by ineluctable process to a state of desperation,” wrote British critic Kenneth Tynan. “Desperate are the cornered giants of Sophocles;





Photo by Gerry Goodstein

#### FIGURE 4.4

Paul Niebanck (*back*) and Victoria Mack in a scene from The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's production of *Pygmalion*. Directed by Bonnie J. Monte; costume design by Karen A. Ledger; lighting design by Steven Rosen; scenic design by Charles T. Witteich, Jr. By use of subtle strategies, the pupil in this scene outsmarts her teacher.

desperate, too, as they huddle in their summerhouses, the becalmed gentry of Chekhov; and the husband of French farce, with a wife in one bedroom and a mistress in another, is he not, though we smile at his agony, definably desperate?"<sup>4</sup> Carrying out your planned strategy must come from your character's objective as a "desperate quest" to overcome any obstacles.

## ADAPTING TO CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCES

While onstage, you must constantly remain in the state of “I am,” playing each moment as if it were occurring for the first time—what the nineteenth-century actor William Gillette referred to as “the illusion of the first time.” As in life, your characters cannot be clairvoyant. They cannot *know* the future. Someone once asked the legendary twentieth-century actor Sir Laurence Olivier how he remembered all his lines in *Hamlet*. He responded with “I don’t. I simply remember the next one.” Colleagues of great actors such as Gillette and Olivier report that they always seemed surprised by the events of the play. They lived in the present. While onstage, even though you *know* the next line and have performed your character’s actions countless times, you cannot truly *know* what will happen next. Attempting to anticipate another person’s actions will only result in your delivering indicated movements with artificial effects. Therefore, you too must play each scene moment-by-moment, remaining in the present.

The state of “I am” does not mean that your character does not think ahead or speculate about the future. In fact, everything you do in the present is conditioned by your **expectations** about the future, and what actually happens is never fully what you expected to occur. The famous acting teacher Uta Hagen wrote, “When the actor anticipates what he will see, hear, and feel and what the others will be doing (because he has seen, heard, and felt them doing the same thing since the early days of rehearsal), it is because he has failed to include the logical expectations that condition his actions or merely paid them lip service.”<sup>5</sup>

**Adaptation**, on the other hand, is synonymous with perhaps the most vital question you must ask yourself while onstage. You have answered the five W’s, and you have devised a strategy, and now adaptation obligates you to answer the essential sixth question, “How?” Of this query, Stanislavski once said, “*Adaptations* are our ‘paints.’” and “Your first duty is to adapt yourself to your partner.” As an actor, you must understand that an action (*What?*) is incomplete unless you fully incorporate answers to “Why?” and “How?” *What* are you doing? *Why* you are doing it? *How* do you accomplish your goal?

Adaptations depend on ever-changing given circumstances. Each time you walk onto the stage, it *is* for the first time; you (and your character) have expectations, but you cannot know. Theatre is a living art; therefore, you have to make **adjustments** to your strategy. There are dozens of ways to break up with your fiancée, burn a letter, fire an employee, or seduce a person to whom you are attracted. Exploration of “How?” is one of most important and satisfying parts of both rehearsals and performances. The more proficient you are at strategizing and then adapting to changing circumstances, the fresher your creation remains. The richer your imagination, the more choices you have. The more choices you explore in rehearsal, the more interesting your final product.

As you are exploring the various means with which to achieve your objective, your partner will have counteractions, thus creating unforeseen obstacles. There must be dramatic conflicts onstage; otherwise, theatre would be amazingly dull. Stanislavski wrote:

Every feeling you express, as you express it, requires an intangible form of adjustment all its own. All types of communication—for example, communication in a group or with an imaginary, present, or absent object—require adjustments peculiar to each.

We use all of our five senses and all the elements of our inner and outer makeup to communicate. We send out rays and receive them, we use our eyes, facial expression, voice and intonation, our hands, fingers, our whole bodies, and in every case we make whatever corresponding adjustments are necessary.<sup>6</sup>

In life, we must all have the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Those who cannot adapt will never get across the street alive, much less manage the more subtle interpersonal challenges they face. We deal with people both logically and psychologically, and the kind of adaptation we make—whether it is bold, delicate, daring, or cautious—is important to our success. Each day brings an infinite number of situations requiring a wide range of adjustments. Your situation is the same onstage. Your performance must always be conceived in relation to other characters who either help or hinder you in accomplishing your objectives, and you must consider these other characters in planning your actions. You have the ability to adapt and sometimes to abandon your plans as you are confronted with the unexpected. You watch, listen, and remain ready to adjust what you do and say to the needs of the moment.

Stage action often seems dull because a realistic sense of adjustment has disappeared in the actor's struggle to remember and repeat lines and movement. A technique that allows for adaptation to the needs of the moment is a necessity in the actor's training. When performing actions onstage, you must concentrate on your actions and how you expect them to affect the behavior of the other performers. You must also focus on other actors' counteractions, their adaptations to your employed strategy. For the audience, the focus, then, is on what happens *between* the performers, for that is where theatre happens.

## IMPROVISING GROUP SCENES

Many people still think that Stanislavski discussed his productions for months before allowing his actors to explore the physical environment. This may have been true before he developed the Method of Physical Actions, but as soon as Stanislavski discovered the psychophysical process of human behavior, he sent actors onstage after they had read the play and briefly discussed the plot and characters. According to Sonia Moore, "Stanislavski realized that the discussions at the table artificially divided the actor's physical and psychological behavior. 'I think that you have done enough work now to begin moving, improvising on the stage.'"<sup>7</sup>

You may obtain further practice in adaptation through exercises involving group improvisation, a further extension of the exercises you have already been doing. Improvising with a group necessitates more complicated and interesting problems, bringing you closer to your ultimate aim of a shared performance. You will begin, as always, with the given circumstances out of which you must create an active, attractive, and truthful objective. You will face an added complication because you cannot know what you will need to do until you know what the others are doing. As they play their objectives, they will create obstacles for you. Because the final definition of the scene will depend on your actions and counteractions with the other performers, you need to be ready to adjust moment by moment. And again, the actions



you adjust must be truthful and logical; you must believe they are what you would really do if you were the character in the circumstances. As you begin to sense your effect on the actions of the other performers and as you adjust your actions to the obstacles they present, you are on your way to learning one of the most important lessons of the theatre: Acting is communal, and successful performance depends utterly on the stimulation you receive from and give to your fellow actors.

Set a time limit—at the beginning, ten to fifteen minutes for a group exercise. After it is over, the work should be carefully analyzed (preferably by a competent observer) so that you are aware of the points at which you have or have not behaved logically and truthfully and at which your adjustments have fallen short of what could have been expected. You can help yourself and sometimes help others by recalling when you succeeded in making real contact, when your actions seemed true and spontaneous, and when they did not. The analysis should not be concerned with whether the scene would be entertaining or exciting to an audience. Improvisation is a means, not an end, and you will defeat its purpose if you think about results other than truthful behavior. Your first attempts may be frustratingly unfruitful because group improvisation is a technique that takes time to learn. But it is time well spent, and it is essential to your training.

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## EXERCISE 4.6

### WAITING

This exercise involves a group of people sitting at a bus station. Know who you are and where you are going. Although we establish immediate relationships with everyone with whom we come in contact, there again should be no reason to speak to one another in this exercise. You may also perform this exercise in the following settings:

- the subway
- high school detention
- an elevator
- in line
- the beach
- a doctor's waiting room
- a park
- a hospital delivery room

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## EXERCISE 4.7

### NOT ON SPEAKING TERMS

This exercise concerns two people who are not on speaking terms. Talk over the given circumstances with your partner. Define your objectives. Know your obstacles. Create a central conflict. Understand your relationship. Determine the five W's. The point of this and all improvisations, however, is an investigation of the sixth question, "How?" In fact, the exploration of *strategy* and *adaptations* is the most important part of rehearsals for a scripted scene or play. For this first exercise in group improvisation, however, do not speak or pantomime. There should be no need to talk. As soon as there is an organic need to speak, the improvisation is complete.



**EXERCISE 4.8****ADD-A-WORD**

This is an excellent exercise helping actors to really listen to one another while reacting quickly. Using four to six actors, make up a story one word at a time. The exercise requires complete trust and vast amounts of energy, telling a story one word at a time. Select one of the following topics or create your own “How to” subject matter.

- how to boil an egg
- how to prove if someone is a witch
- how to become a vegetarian
- how to give your dog a bath
- how to fold the bottom sheet
- how to apply makeup
- how to dress a wound
- how to milk a cow
- how to tame a bully
- how to cure dyslexia
- how to cure an itchy rash
- how to make a sandwich
- how to survive a blind date
- how to start a cyber business
- how to stuff a turkey
- how to clean a litter box
- how to perform plastic surgery
- how to violate the Constitution without really trying
- how to build a widget

You may also do the same exercise using nontraditional historical events as the basis of your group story. Below are examples.

- the cracking of the Liberty Bell
- the real Midnight Ride of Paul Revere
- Moses coming down from the mountain
- the invention of fire
- the first trick ever pulled while trick-or-treating
- the repeal of Prohibition
- Christopher Columbus’ discovery of Cuba
- the founding of Rome
- Watergate
- the signing of the Declaration of Independence
- the entrance of the Trojan Horse
- the unveiling of Michelangelo’s David
- Women’s Suffrage Movement
- the Inquisition
- the docking of Noah’s arc
- the completion of the Great Pyramids
- the invention of the English language
- the Boxer Rebellion

**EXERCISE 4.9****YES, AND ...**

All good improvisation involving two or more actors is based on the power of accepting what has been given to you and building upon it. This is a common but effective exercise in which two actors learn to build an improvisational scene that moves forward by accepting whatever given circumstances are given to them, agreeing completely with each other, and moving the plot forward by beginning each line with some variation of the words, “Yes, and....” The scene begins with two strangers who meet in a public place. Either actor may decide

the topic. The goal is to agree with each other as much as possible while building the story together. Select one of the following places listed below, or make up your own location.

- summer camp
- a bar
- a park bench
- a church picnic
- Victoria's Secret
- a hotel lobby
- a concert
- the free clinic
- Disneyland
- a family reunion
- a cult recruitment event
- the gym
- a PTA meeting
- a World Wrestling Entertainment match
- a speed dating meeting
- a junior high dance
- an airport
- the return line just after the holidays
- Purgatory
- Chuck E. Cheese
- prison
- the barracks on the first day of boot camp
- in line to see the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*
- a couple's therapy waiting room
- an audition
- an Easter egg hunt
- the beach
- a frat party
- a PETA rally during NY Fashion Week
- an athletic event
- a Laundromat
- an AA meeting
- a bus stop
- a speech therapist's reception area
- a nudist resort
- a carnival
- a comic book convention
- the grocery store
- outside a confessional
- an NRA meeting

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#### EXERCISE 4.10

#### FIRST LINE/LAST LINE

With help from your class, decide on a location, and then create the first and last lines of a scene in which the lines have nothing to do with one another. For example, the first line might be something like, "I was so sick!" The last line might be, "I love Hostess Ding Dongs!" The location might be taken from the list provided in Exercise 3.4, or select one of your own. The scene begins with the first line. Actors work together to steer the action and lines logically toward the last line. As in the previous exercise, each actor must accept what is given to him and move the story forward. Remember, "you" cannot do anything unless "you" have to do so at that precise moment, and "you" cannot say anything unless necessitated by the given circumstances.

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#### EXERCISE 4.11

#### ARGUMENT OVER A TABLE

Two actors stand on opposite sides of a table. The class decides on the location. One actor decides who she is and launches into an argument. The other actor must take what is given to him and move the dispute forward. For example, the class may determine the scene takes place in an Italian restaurant. The first actor then decides she is an angry

customer complaining about the spices in her lasagna. She implies she is speaking to the chef. The second actor must then assume the role of the chef and continue the squabble.

This same exercise may be also done as a game of “freeze tag” in which classmates disrupt the scene by yelling, “Freeze!” That person then runs to the “frozen” scene, tags one of the actors, assumes her position, and takes the scene in a totally new direction. The new actor then starts a fresh argument—perhaps in a new location—with the other actor accepting the new given circumstances and retorts.

The value of group improvisation lies in your learning to make real contact with other actors, to heed what they do and say, to adapt the playing of your objective to the need of the moment, and to work freely and logically within the imaginary circumstances. What you learn should carry over into everything you do because all good acting is to some degree improvisational. Even a scene that has been “set” demands constant adjustment—a living connection with fellow players. The choices you make in the adjustments must be credible and appropriate. Behaving logically within the circumstances is the beginning of truthful acting. Avoid choices that are sensational, that are calculated solely for dramatic effect, or that mindlessly repeat what you have seen other actors do or even what you have done in the past. Verbal group improvisation is best when your imagination leads you truthfully into spontaneous adjustments.

Verbal improvisation is decidedly different from nonverbal improvisation in that it requires the actors to create their own dialogue. You should always remember that words and physical actions are synonymous. Just as you do not perform a physical action until the circumstances demand you to do so, you must not speak until the situation mandates it. Like all physical actions, verbal action is a means of expressing inner life. As you add dialogue to a scene, you must carefully consider your character’s inner life and “your” relationship to the other people and circumstances. Although the dialogue is not scripted, your words, your inflections, your syntax, your inner objects, and your silences directly affect your partner, and ultimately the audience, at least as much as your external physical actions. Just as you do in life, you are attempting to influence the actions, images, and emotions of others through words in your fictitious improvisational scenes.

As in life, you must listen with full attention. You must respond to the other character’s words through your psychophysical being. If your partner onstage is attempting to cheer you up through her verbal and physical actions, she is looking into your eyes for continual feedback. She is watching your movements and gestures and interpreting your projected mood. Whatever your objectives, your partner must have counteractions to create obstacles. As with scripted scenes, you and your partners must create communion onstage. There must also be communion between the actors and audience, and the audience must completely *suspend their disbelief* for the entirety of the scene. In short, you must believe in your character, your given circumstances, your relationships, and your every action. Otherwise, your improvisation will fall short of its intended goal.





Photo by Kenneth L. Stilson.

**FIGURE 4.5**

Audrey Stanfield (*left*), Scott Hamann, Marisa Rapp, and Carly Earl in a scene from Southeast Missouri State University's production of *Rumors*. Directed by Kenneth L. Stilson; costume design by Rhonda Weller-Stilson and Deana Luetkenhaus; lighting design by Jeffrey Luetkenhaus; scenic design by Ron Naverson. Training in sketch comedy and group improvisation helps these actors make creative choices and to work spontaneously off the actions of their partners.

A final word of caution with your verbal improvisations: Do not try to impress your classmates with your quick wit! Contrary to some people's belief, verbal improvisation is not the same as comedy improvisation such as you would see on the television show *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* or onstage with Second City or The Groundlings. Verbal improvisation must complement your formal acting technique training. These improvisations, more often than not, are dramatic in nature. Your characters, situations, and actions must be completely three-dimensional. By pandering to the audience and by attempting to transform every improvisation into a comedy sketch, you will succeed in creating only the shell of a human being.

**EXERCISE 4.12****BUILDING A SITUATION**

These first verbal improvisations involve two people. Build the situation. Think of the analogous emotion that you have experienced in life. When you are onstage, think of the physical behavior that will be expressive of what you have built in your mind. The partial objectives



listed here are intended for one of the actors; however, the partner must create his own objective and counteractions.

- |                |                |                |
|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| • To humiliate | • To deceive   | • To persuade  |
| • To enlighten | • To challenge | • To coax      |
| • To encourage | • To motivate  | • To con       |
| • To provoke   | • To tempt     | • To coerce    |
| • To bait      | • To dare      | • To galvanize |
| • To teach     | • To brainwash | • To confuse   |

Come up with additional action verbs that motivate immediate simple actions.

## EXERCISE 4.13

## GROUP IMPROVISATIONS FROM SCENARIOS

The following situations provide opportunities for verbal group improvisations. In each case, additional circumstances must be supplied from either the play or the imaginations of the actors. All characters must clearly understand their objectives and attempt to realize them through actions appropriate to the circumstances.

- A. In *Pizza Man*, by Darlene Craviotto, Eddie, the pizza man, arrives at the home of Julie and Alice with a delivery. He has no idea the women intend to rape him. The ladies invite him in to relax on the sofa. They make small talk before engaging in a series of seductive advances. With neither woman having much experience or success with men, their sexual onslaughts are extremely awkward.
- B. In *Tales of the Lost Formicans*, by Constance Congdon, a group of aliens gather around Jerry, an unconscious human, taking notes. Jerry wakes up, sees the strange beings, and opens his mouth to scream but can't make a sound. They have rendered him mute. To calm his nerves, the Aliens massage his jaw and stroke him like children petting a dog. They proceed with the examination—it should satirize a field examination of a wild animal—all with the air of dispassionate scientists. For example, one Alien finds various objects in Jerry's pockets and holds them up for other Aliens to see. They all laugh rhythmically. After the examination is complete, the Aliens tag Jerry's ear, zap him unconscious, and exit.
- C. In Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, Walter Younger, his wife, Ruth, and his sister, Beneatha, talk of their hopes and dreams after receiving a large insurance check following the death of Walter and Beneatha's father. Walter dreams of owning a liquor store. Beneatha talks about becoming a doctor. Ruth wants to invest the money in additional space and for their son's future. Throughout the scene, which takes place in a small tenement apartment in Chicago's south side, the three jockey for time in the bathroom.
- D. In *Cover*, by Jeffrey Sweet with Stephen Johnson and Sandra Hastie, twenty-year-old Marty tries to convince his friend Frank to

lie to his girlfriend Diane that the two of them were together last night. The truth is, however, Marty had a date with another girl. Frank doesn't want to lie, but when Diane arrives and brings up last night, he finds aspersions pouring from his mouth.

- E. In *Big River*, by William Hauptman and Roger Miller, Huck Finn follows Tom Sawyer to a cave on the side of a hill, with walls "of clay—damp, sweaty, and cold as a corpse." Tom lights a candle as they enter the cave. Ben Rogers, Jo Harper, Dick, and Simon are already there. Their intention at this gathering is to start a gang of robbers, Tom Sawyer's Gang. They discuss their mission to rob and murder before swearing an oath of secrecy, punishable by death to the families of the boys who tell the secrets. (This improvisation can be performed by men and women of any ethnicity.)
- F. In Tony Kushner's *A Bright Room Called Day*, five friends have gathered in Agnes's apartment in Berlin in 1932. They have been celebrating the New Year. As the scene progresses, their conversation turns to Hitler and the war.
- G. In *Baby with the Bathwater*, by Christopher Durang, John and Helen have a new baby but have no idea what to do with it. In fact, they can't seem to agree on its sex. Unbeknownst to either parent, Nanny arrives and tries to determine the gender and explain the proper care and maintenance of the little boy ... or girl.
- H. In *Fences*, by August Wilson, Troy Maxon tells his wife, Rose, that he is going to have a baby by another woman. Soon after he breaks the news, Gabe, Troy's brain-damaged brother, enters talking about various things. The two try to talk in between Gabe's babbling until Rose suggests that he go inside to make himself a sandwich. After he enters into the house, Troy and Rose continue their discussion.
- I. In *Murder at the Howard Johnson's*, by Ron Clark and Sam Bobrick, Arlene has fallen madly in love with her family dentist, Mitchell Lovell, and she intends to ask her husband, Paul, for a divorce. Anticipating Paul's rejection to grant her request, the lovers concoct a plan to murder him. When Paul arrives at the motel where Arlene and Mitchell are secretly waiting for him, Arlene tells him about the divorce. When he refuses, the inept lovers unleash several unsuccessful plans to murder him.
- J. In *Five Women Wearing the Same Dress*, by Alan Ball, four mostly unwilling bridesmaids lounge in a bedroom while the sounds of a rather raucous wedding reception can be heard outside. Frances, the youngest and most naïve of the lot, sits in front of a vanity, while Trisha and Georgeanne sit by her side performing a make-over. Trisha applies makeup; Georgeanne prepares to apply nail polish. Mindy is seated on the edge of the bed, holding a plate of food. All except Frances have made themselves comfortable; most have cocktails and are at various levels of inebriation.

- K. In Frank Loesser's *Guys and Dolls*, a group of gamblers convene in a New York City sewer for a high-rolling, illegal crap game. The group comprises gentlemen gangsters and shysters, who have chosen this spot to avoid detection from the law. The men enter into the space, greet one another (while sizing each other up), remove their jackets and hats, count their money, prepare strategies, and jockey for position around the central area.
- L. In *Catholic School Girls*, by Casey Kurtti, four first-grade girls—Elizabeth, Colleen, Wanda, and Maria Theresa—enter into the classroom. They are dressed in white uniform blouses, blue ties, white cotton slips, knee socks, and brown oxford shoes. They are carrying their uniform jumpers. They each stand by a student desk and begin to dress. They look around the classroom and at each other as they dress. Then Elizabeth raises her skirt to pull her blouse down neatly. All follow suit, straightening their blouses. When they are finished, Elizabeth shouts that she is ready. On this first day of school, the girls await the arrival of their teacher.
- M. In Eugène Ionesco's dark, absurdist comedy, *The Lesson*, a mild-mannered professor and his newest female student prepare for her first lesson in his home. At the beginning of the scene, she is quite shy but then becomes progressively agitated and whiny as the scene goes on. She complains periodically of a toothache that also worsens as the action unfolds. As her pain increases, so does the intensity of the professor's lecture. Finally, he works himself up into a state of frenzy bordering on hysteria. At the peak of his fervor, he pulls out a knife and stabs the girl repeatedly. Following the murder, he becomes immediately frightened and contrite. He confesses his latest crime to the housekeeper, who is not at all happy with his actions, treating him as a bad child.
- N. In Howard Korder's *Boys' Life*, Karen and Phil unexpectedly meet at a party. Having pulled her into a bedroom, Phil tries to revive what he perceives as their love affair. Karen reminds him it was simply a "one-night stand" and they haven't spoken for over two months. He persists and invites her to go away with him for the weekend. She resists at first but softens as the scene continues. Through it all, a Man repeatedly enters the bedroom trying to retrieve his coat before being ushered out by Phil. When Phil and Karen begin seriously making out, the Man returns one last time to retrieve his coat. Embarrassed, Karen excuses herself. The Man then tells Phil that he was indeed her date for the evening.
- O. In *The Rainmaker*, by N. Richard Nash, H. C. Curry and his two sons go to town to try to get the deputy sheriff, File, to pay a call on Lizzie (H. C.'s daughter), who is nearing the time when she will be thought of as an "old maid." They try to work the invitation into their conversation without being obvious about it.
- P. In *A Soldier's Play*, by Charles Fuller, a group of black soldiers return to their barracks after a baseball game. They are carrying



their equipment, and they engage in the exuberant, loud, locker-room banter of young men in the army. A sergeant unexpectedly enters, and the raucousness of their conversation abruptly abates. (Actors of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds could play this improvisation.)

## EXERCISE 4.14

## NON-CONTENT SCENES

Thus far, we have introduced numerous acting exercises with selected bits of given circumstances, yet the dialogue was left to improvisation. **Non-content scenes** are also improvisational because they are an excellent way to introduce specific dialogue into predetermined and yet unprepared scenarios. We refer to them as “non-content” because although there is explicit dialogue, there is no fixed plot or characterization. Non-content scenes can be quickly memorized—usually in less than ten minutes.

Working in a classroom situation, the instructor will divide the class into pairs and assign the following dialogue:

### Sequence A

- A: I can't believe you're doing this
- B: It's the best thing
- A: You cannot be serious
- B: Trust me
- A: Please
- B: What does that mean
- A: Watch
- B: I can't
- A: That's different
- B: You're really good

Each pair of actors will decide who will memorize character A's lines and who will memorize character B's lines. Lines should be memorized by working aloud together. During memorization, you should refrain from interpreting the lines; at this point, the script is to be learned simply by rote.

When you have memorized the lines, the instructor will switch pairings so that each “A” will be coupled with a “B” with whom they have not rehearsed or spoken the assigned dialogue. Working with one group at a time, the instructor will then assign one of the following scenarios upon which to build the improvisational scene:

- A. You have been invited to a formal, but you don't know how to dance. Your sister (or brother) is trying to teach you a few basic moves.



- B. You are seriously ill with the flu, but you have a second callback with a major Broadway producer in one hour. Your friend (or significant other) comes over to help you get dressed and ready for the audition.
- C. You and a fellow student break into a professor's office to look for an exam you are to take in the morning.
- D. On the battlefield, you try to rescue one of your fellow soldiers, but you must stay beneath the gunfire while crossing to safety.
- E. It is the evening before Halloween, and you have been asked to find a place for a party. You and a friend break into a vacant house that is reportedly haunted.
- F. You have developed intimate feelings for a long-time friend. While helping him (or her) with his homework, you attempt to share your feelings. (You may substitute any activity for homework.)
- G. While doing the dishes, you lose your wedding ring down the drain. You and your spouse try to retrieve the ring.
- H. While hiking in the woods, your friend falls and twists his (or her) ankle. You must stabilize the injury before helping him back to camp.
- I. You and a friend are at a sorority (or fraternity) party. You both desperately want to become members of this group. You have both been drinking, but your friend has had a few too many. Outside the house, you try to sober up your friend before returning to the party.
- J. Any other scenario given to you by your instructor.

Because the dialogue in a non-content scene has no specific meaning, you must build upon the given circumstances using your assigned scenario as a basis for your improvisation. The lines, however, are completely open to interpretation. Thus, you are serving as the playwright by creating who, what, when, where, why, and how. As this is an exercise in subtext, you are not allowed to change the actual text in any way. In other words, there should be no adlibbing. No person may deliver two lines in a row, and you may not switch characters in the middle of a scene. Additionally, you cannot speak any line until it is completely logical for your character to do so.

Non-content scenes are action-centered, and each participant should have a clearly defined objective while working against major obstacles. Remember, the action may begin well before the first line is spoken, and what occurs between the lines is as important as the subtext of the lines themselves. Non-content exercises force you to make defined and actable choices, but you must avoid the trap of always making obvious choices. Consider alternative line readings. Playing the opposite of the obvious will make your scene infinitely more interesting. It is incumbent upon you to work off your partner and to fully commit to each of your selected actions. This exercise is the perfect way to master the previously presented techniques without having to

fully analyze an entire script. Non-content scenes may be performed multiple times with various combinations of partners.

The following sequences may be substituted with the preceding non-content scenarios:

#### Sequence B

A: Excuse me  
B: Don't  
A: I have to  
B: I don't understand  
A: This is your fault  
B: I need you  
A: After what you did  
B: Let me try  
A: Is it real  
B: Yes ... No  
A: Fine

#### Sequence C

A: No  
B: Please  
A: I can't  
B: Watch  
A: I'm trying  
B: Look  
A: This makes me nervous  
B: That's it  
A: Help  
B: Wow  
A: You owe me big time

## Developing Your Powers of Observation

*"A true artist is inspired by everything that takes place around him."*

**Constantin Stanislavski**

Great actors have the uncanny, chameleon-like ability to observe lives and adapt their own bodies and minds to fit every new character that springs forth from their imaginations. They know every portrayal is highly unique. Every creation is physically, vocally, and psychologically different. Each character materializes from some untapped source within an actor and differs from any other individual he or she has ever brought to life.

Look at the phenomenal range and development of two-time Academy Award-winning actor Tom Hanks, beginning with his work on the television series *Bosom Buddies* and in his early films such as *Splash*, *Bachelor Party*, and *The Money Pit*, followed by his explosion as one of the greatest and most malleable actors in the world today. Hanks' ability to observe diverse people and cultures is astonishing, and the wide range of characters he created in *Big*, *A League of Their Own*, *Sleepless in Seattle*, *Philadelphia*, *Forrest Gump*, *Apollo 13*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Cast Away*, *Ladykillers*, *The Terminal*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *Angels and Demons*, *Charlie Wilson's War*, and the animated feature, *Toy Story*, are extraordinarily diverse.

Another brilliant actor, Brian Dennehy, featured on the cover of this edition playing the role of Charlie Hughes in The Goodman Theatre's stage production of Eugene O'Neill's *Hughie*, began his career in the 1970s playing bit parts and supporting roles in a wide array of television series and feature films. Beginning with a small role on one episode of television's hit comedy, *M\*A\*S\*H*, to bit parts in such films as *Semi-Tough*, *F.I.S.T.*, and *Foul Play*, Dennehy's career took off with Blake Edward's 1979 hit, *10*. From there,

he went on to star in a flood of wide-ranging stage productions, television series, and in such films as *First Blood*, *Gorky Park*, *Silverado*, *Cocoon*, *F/X*, *Tommy Boy*, *Death of a Salesman*, *William Shakespeare's Romeo+Juliet*, *Righteous Kill*, and the animated feature, *Ratatouille*.

Each character created by such actors as Tom Hanks and Brian Dennehy has distinctive internal thoughts, images, desires, impulses, fears, prejudices, and points of view. Even the greatest actors may create characters that have some external similarities, but through imagination and the power of observation, these actors develop for each character a singular method of expressing behavior through speech, movement, and gesture.

As an actor, each of your portrayals must be a singular creation derived from three sources: the given circumstances as interpreted from the script and the surrounding production; your imagination; and your **personal history**, including everything you have experienced, felt, read, or observed in life or fiction. For each character, you must touch a different wellspring from within your lifetime of observations. You are your own instrument. Unlike the pianist and the painter, you have only your own body and spirit. You are the creator, the material, and the instrument all in one. Therefore, you must develop your ability to *see*. You must expand your ability to absorb mental images to be used onstage or on screen at a later time.

One of the most important parts of your acting training is the observation of life itself. You must be a student of life, a person who can remain objective while observing the subjective actions of others. You must develop your skills of observing both the ordinary and the unusual in your everyday life. Our senses are so intensely bombarded by our all-inclusive surroundings in the modern world that we tend to take most things for granted. We do not *really* look at people's faces, hear their voices, listen to sounds, or even taste the food for which we have paid dearly in an expensive restaurant. Emily in *Our Town*, by Thornton Wilder, movingly expresses this indifference. Returning from the dead to relive a childhood experience, she sees people going insensitively about their everyday tasks. She says of her family at breakfast: "They don't even take time to look at one another." You must learn to observe familiar things as if you had never seen them before, and you must retain the experience. Through remembered observation, you will build a stockpile of materials from which you can construct performances. But more important, you will enrich your life, and an enriched life increases your chances of being an insightful actor.

Just as you "surf the net" for data to be downloaded onto your computer, so must you build your mind's capacity to take in mental images. Just as you add additional memory into your computer to increase its capacity, so must you expand your power to store your observations. After these memories have been added into your "storage," you must develop the ability to objectively recall them when necessary onstage. The power of observation makes you sensitive to humanity and to the art of creating a new human being living in an imagined world. The ability to see facilitates your adjustments to any business you may be required to perform in a role. When an actor



*really* observes another person's behavior, it opens his eyes "to the full extent in appreciation of different personalities and values in people and works of art ... it enriches his inner life by full and extensive consumption of everything in outward life," wrote Richard Boleslavsky. "The actor who has his gift of observation dulled and inactive will appear in worn-out dress on a gala occasion. As a rule, I believe that inspiration is the result of hard work, but the only thing which can stimulate inspiration in an actor is constant and keen observation every day of his life."<sup>1</sup>

Observations produce **inner images** that reside in your subconscious. They are the mental pictures that flash across your mind as you speak. You must have the capability to recall at will your inner images because this enables you to transform scripted dialogue and onstage objects from something cold, intellectual, and rational into something that is "warmly felt." Developing your ability to contact your inner images relates directly with your ability to observe and retain the life around you.

As an actor, you cannot withdraw yourself from life, for your work onstage must reflect real people. To become an artistic recluse goes against every principle of technique training. As a student of life, you must observe the behavior of others, remain abreast of contemporary events, and read biographies and political and cultural histories. Study movies, television, photography, art, literature, psychology, sports, languages, and even the culinary arts. Nothing is outside your realm as an actor. Observe the world by traveling. When you are experiencing another culture, observe their customs and behaviors without judgment. Search for beauty. "For the good and the beautiful," Stanislavski points out, "exalts the mind and evokes a man's best feelings, leaving indelible traces on his emotional and other memories."<sup>2</sup> Stanislavski encouraged his actors to study nature, both the beautiful and the ugly. Try to put into words what you see, and learn from your observations. You cannot be an actor (or any artist) without the ability to *really see*. Stanislavski said that

Life excites [the true artist] and becomes the object of his study and his passion; he eagerly observes all he sees and tries to imprint it on his memory not as a statistician, but as an artist, not only in his notebook, but also in his heart. It is, in short, impossible to work in art in a detached way. We must possess a certain degree of inner warmth; we must have sensuous attention. That does not mean, however, that we must renounce our reason, for it is possible to reason warmly, and not coldly.<sup>3</sup>

The technique of observation begins with a conscious effort to develop fuller awareness of happenings around us, a fine-tuned sensitivity to what we see, hear, taste, feel, and smell. Uta Hagen tells a story of an argument between Albert Basserman's director and a designer about producing the special effect of an actual rainstorm onstage. After a brief discussion, Basserman interrupted with, "Pardon me, but when I enter, it will rain!" According to a report, when Basserman entered, it did rain—without special effects.<sup>4</sup>

Observation is both intellectual and sensory. The mind tells us the uses of things, classifies them, analyzes them in any one of a number of ways, and permits us to retain them in memory. Recognizing that a flower is a carnation and not a buttercup and is red and not yellow is an intellectual response. However, we perceive the flower through our senses. Experiencing a carnation is not just knowing about it. It is seeing its color, smelling its fragrance, holding it, touching it. Fortunately, our memory can retain sensory as well as intellectual experience, and sensory perception is the bedrock of the technique of observation. You must have the capacity to recall not only your knowledge of the carnation but also the way it affected your senses.

The more extreme your sensory experience, the easier it will be to recall onstage. At some point in your life, you have surely stubbed your toe, burned your finger, or cut yourself on a sharp object. But how do you recall everyday experiences? While onstage, how do you deal with putting on mascara with a brush that has no makeup on it? How do you drink tea as if it were brandy, get drunk on a nonalcoholic beverage, burn your tongue on food that is room temperature, or nick your face with a bladeless razor? How do you make yourself believe you are hot and sweaty while onstage in a cold theatre, nauseated due to illness that does not exist, or, like Basserman, make it rain on a dry stage? The more sensitive you are to the real world, the more intensely you will respond to the stimulus that induces these everyday sensory experiences.

As an actor, you must have the dexterity to produce a natural behavioral response to arrive at the essence of the experience. Just as you cannot “play” an emotion, you cannot entirely produce a sensory experience simply by thinking about it or isolating it from subsequent behavior. There are two ways in which you may make your onstage sensory experiences truthful to yourself and to your audience.

First, you may give the quality of one object to the quality of another object. For example, you may drink water as if it were vodka. A cold stove may be treated as if it were hot, and a dry mascara brush may be treated as if the bristles were wet with makeup. Playwrights often require physical objects that actors cannot actually use onstage. Real firearms, drugs, and alcohol obviously do not belong onstage because they pose a genuine danger to the actor or alter the actor’s mode of thinking. Drinking beer onstage is not a morality question but rather a question of foolishness. The theatre has no room for anything that poses a threat or affects your ability to think or act with clarity. Even such everyday objects as eye makeup, onions, and hot irons are precarious items for the actor to use while performing before hundreds of people. In the same regard, valuable antiques, jewelry, authentic paintings, and any object of extreme value should not be onstage. The actor must find similar, less dangerous or less expensive objects and bestow upon them the essential qualities of the actual item.

Second, to discover truthful environmental and human conditions, such as heat, rain, sleet, drunkenness, anxiety, and exhaustion, you must determine their precise cause and their particular effect on a specific part of the body.



Photo by John Underwood

**FIGURE 5.1**

Jake Mahler (left) and Jess Dodds in a scene from Purdue University's production of *Almost, Maine*. Directed by Richard Stockton Rand; costume design by Anthony Paul-Cavaretta; lighting design by Drew Kelsey; scenic design by Eric Luchen. Although the theatre is probably a comfortable 68 degrees, the actors in this scene must play the cold and snowy conditions.

From there, you must find the correct physical adjustment necessary to overcome the condition. If, for example, you arrive at your “imaginary” beach and try to “feel” the intense heat of the sun by simply thinking about it, you will find it almost impossible to believe your reality. You can, however, believe an appropriate set of physical actions that result from the imagined conditions that surround you.

**EXERCISE 5.1****PLAYING A CONDITION**

Perform the sequence of actions listed in the simple score that follows. Instead of isolating the condition of heat, simply concentrate on the activities.

**The Beginning: "Hot, Hot, Hot"**

1. Carrying a bag and a cooler, walk quickly to selected spot on "sandy beach."
2. Set down bag and cooler.
3. Take towel from bag.
4. Spread towel onto sand.
5. Hop onto towel as quickly as possible.
6. Wipe sand off bottom of feet.

**The Middle: "Taking It In" 6**

7. Notice ship off in distance.
8. Squint.
9. Shield eyes, and look up at glaring sun.
10. Rummage through bag for sunglasses.
11. Put on sunglasses, and look again at ship.
12. Grab cold beverage from cooler.
13. Open can, and take long drink.

**The End: "Nirvana" 13**

14. Sit on towel.
15. Find suntan lotion in bag.
16. Apply lotion while watching seagulls dance overhead.
17. Find book and small pillow in bag.
18. Take another long drink.
19. Place pillow at end of towel.
20. Take iPod© from bag.
21. Plug in earphones and select song.
22. Lie back and shut eyes.

Your belief in the condition of heat results from your belief in your score of physical actions.

To believe your stage life, including the most trivial sensory conditions, you must either substitute the qualities of one object for that of another or perform the logical sequence of physical actions necessary to alleviate the imagined conditions. Only then can you produce the sensation at will.<sup>5</sup> To believe you are drinking a steaming cup of coffee when in fact it is room temperature, you perhaps stir it with a spoon and blow across the brim before carefully picking up the "hot" cup with your fingertips and taking a sip. Onstage exhaustion may perhaps be achieved by kicking off your shoes, putting on your slippers, pouring a drink, reclining on the sofa, turning on the



Photo courtesy of The University of Oklahoma School of Drama

**FIGURE 5.2**

Chris Baldwin in a scene from The University of Oklahoma School of Drama's production of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Directed by Tom Huston Orr; lighting design by Dave Young. Water in this scene falls in a controlled horizontal line across the stage from the grid into a trough on the floor. The kneeling actor remains dry upstage of the falling water, but his truthful behavior gives the illusion of actual rain to the audience.

television, sipping your drink, and shutting your eyes. What do you do to alleviate the environmental condition of rain? What is the sequence of actions you undertake to alleviate the human condition of grogginess when waking up from a deep sleep? What do you do to lessen the condition caused by a pungent odor, a sour lemon, a bitter pill, a dark room, or a slippery surface? Just as the Method of Physical Actions allows you to discover true emotion, an appropriate sequence of physical actions allows you to actually believe in the sensory experience.

## EXERCISE 5.2

### THREE OBJECTS

Create a scenario using three objects that cannot or should not appear onstage. Substitute similar objects and give them the essential qualities of the actual items. Provide for yourself given circumstances. Establish your objective and obstacle(s). Score your actions, and title

your units. Remember, the sensory experiences are not the primary purpose of the scene but simply part of the given circumstances. You may use the objects listed here or create your own.

#### **Object Used Onstage:**

- inexpensive vase or glass
- cold iron
- toy pistol or rifle
- rubber or plastic knife
- doll
- empty jar and dry mascara brush
- a print
- clove cigarettes
- plastic or cardboard crown
- empty jar and dry fingernail brush
- costume jewelry
- rope
- razor with no blade
- tea
- candy
- apple
- silk flower
- water
- canned peaches

#### **Given the Qualities Of:**

- a valuable antique
- a hot iron
- a real pistol or rifle
- a sharp knife
- a newborn baby
- liquid mascara
- a valuable oil painting
- marijuana
- a real crown
- actual nail polish
- valuable jewelry
- a snake
- a bladed razor
- hot coffee or brandy
- medicine
- an onion
- a rose
- vodka or acid
- oysters or eggs

### **EXERCISE 5.3**

#### **ADJUSTING TO CONDITIONS**

- A. Adapt your score of physical actions from the preceding exercise with one or more imaginary conditions. The manner in which you react to or attempt to remedy your condition is part of your adaptations to achieving your objective. You may use the following environmental or human conditions or create your own.

##### **Environmental Condition**

- summer evening
- winter morning before daylight
- sweltering summer afternoon
- rainy day
- snowy winter day
- crisp spring morning
- windy fall afternoon
- autumn evening
- bright winter day
- spring evening
- winter ice storm

##### **Human Condition**

- drunkenness
- nausea
- exhaustion
- high (drug-induced)
- stress
- depression
- headache
- starvation
- upset stomach
- vertigo
- broken bone

- B. Perform the same sequence of actions, but add the element of time. As an actor, you must always have a specific idea about how much time you have and how much time the specific sequence of actions will take. Notice how the tempo-rhythm of the scene changes with the amount of time you have to complete your objective.

Increasing your awareness of what goes on around you and developing your **sense memory** are your first steps toward developing your powers of observation. After you have command of observation techniques, you will find that they provide you with three essential kinds of information that can be used as raw material for building a character:

1. Characteristics of *human behavior* (manners of moving, speaking, gesturing, and so forth) that may be reproduced precisely on the stage
2. Other *human situations* that, when filtered through your imagination, may be adapted for use on the stage
3. *Abstract qualities* of animals, plants, and inanimate objects that can help stimulate your imagination about how characters *might* look or behave on the stage

In a description of her working methods, Helen Hayes gave examples of these uses of observation. After defining acting talent as “a peculiarly alert awareness of other people,” she continued:

When I was preparing for my role of the duchess in Anouilh’s *Time Remembered*, I had some difficulty capturing the spirit of the role, until ... I heard some music written by Giles Farnaby for the virginal—you know, one of those sixteenth-century instruments.... That old duchess, I told myself, is like the music, light, dainty, period, pompous, tinkling. And, poor me, I’d been playing her like a bass drum. I had one scene in *Victoria Regina* that I played like one of my poodles.... I had a poodle that used to just sit, and he’d look almost intoxicated when I’d say, “Oh, Turvey, you are the most beautiful dog.” ... and believe me every night for a thousand and some performances of that play, I saw that poodle.<sup>6</sup>

## OBSERVING PEOPLE

“Always and forever, when you are on the stage, you must play yourself,” wrote Stanislavski. “But it will be in an infinite variety of combinations of objectives and given circumstances which you have prepared for your part, and which have been smelted in the furnace of your **emotion memory**.”<sup>7</sup> The impartial observation of other people is most certainly an important part of actor training; however, this skill is most useful when you learn something about yourself in the process. The simple manifestation of external gestures and movement serves no purpose unless you discover that you have behaved in a similar fashion under different circumstances. You cannot get away from yourself onstage without it leading to *indicated* actions. Therefore, as you

observe others, you must find a way to identify with their actions within your own person.

Tom Hanks, for example, drew upon his own childhood experiences in creating the role of Josh Baskin in the feature film, *Big*. After expressing his wish to be “big” to an unplugged electric carnival fortuneteller, young Josh physically passed over pre-adolescence and emerged as an adult. “When I was thirteen ... I was younger than my years,” Hanks told a reporter of his approach to creating Baskin.

I could still play really well. I can remember things that I loved to do, the way you could have toy soldiers or a plane, and you could sit on the couch for hours and have incredible adventures. And I remember being clueless. I remember adults talking to me and just going, “Yeah, right,” but not knowing what they were talking about.... I remember being thirteen and being all elbows and knees.... The girls had already grown up. I started the role with the point of view of a newborn giraffe. They have spindly heads that look geeky when they run.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to remembering his own childhood, Hanks spent countless hours making careful observations of David Moscow, the twelve-year-old boy who played Josh as a child. He also studied his own children, who were then ten and six years old. “I tried to get a sense from them of play for the sake of play, of having cars on the carpet and having this great time where you make up your own story, your own little world.”<sup>9</sup>

When Hanks later created the title role in *Forrest Gump*, he again drew upon his own personal history, but he was concerned that he needed to speak with a southern dialect. He managed the accent by observing and adopting the vocal patterns of Michael Humphrey, the eight-year-old Mississippi boy cast in the film as young Forrest. He took great pains to research his role. For six months, he even spent a substantial amount of time observing patients at a psychiatric hospital in Los Angeles to help him prepare to create the character of Forrest Gump.

“Developing a characterization is not merely a matter of putting on makeup and a costume and stuffing Kleenex in your mouth,” wrote the late Marlon Brando of his development of Don Corleone in *The Godfather*. “That’s what actors used to do, and then called it a characterization. In acting, everything comes out of what you are or some aspect of who you are. Everything is part of your experience.” Brando had an innate ability to absorb the world around him and incorporate his observations into his characters. “I thought it would be interesting to play a gangster ... who wasn’t like those bad guys Edward G. Robinson played, but who was a kind of hero, a man to be respected.” Because of Corleone’s power, Brando decided to play him as a gentle man who was quite the opposite of Al Capone, who thrashed people with baseball bats. “I saw him as a man of substance, tradition, dignity, refinement, a man of unerring instinct who just happened to live in a violent world and who had to protect himself and his family in this environment.” *The Godfather* was filmed in the seventies, and Brando, throughout the initial creative process, observed the real Mafia. In his autobiography, he reported on a “war” in Little Italy between members of a



group called the Black Hand, who were extorting money from immigrants. Some paid for their safety, whereas others, just like Don Corleone, fought back. He also drew from the government. “There were not many things you could say about the Mafia that you couldn’t say about other elements in the United States. Was there much difference between mob murders and Operation Phoenix, the CIA’s assassination program in Vietnam?” From these observations, he created a character who was modeled after a CEO of a multinational corporation, a high-ranking government official of the day, or one of the CIA representatives who dealt in drugs in the Golden Triangle while torturing people for information. Nothing was personal.<sup>10</sup>

There are countless other examples of observations used as sources of inspiration for characters. In creating the role of Marcela Howard in *Seabiscuit*, Elizabeth Banks was heavily influenced by the actual Mrs. Howard, the second wife of Seabiscuit’s owner, Charles Howard. Tobey Maguire certainly studied the real Johnny “Red” Pollard when creating his role in *Seabiscuit*. Leonardo DeCaprio observed hours of film footage of the real Howard Hughes when creating a younger version of the man in *The Aviator*, just as Kevin Kline studied the actual Cole Porter for nine months before creating his character in *De-Lovely*. Michelle Pfeiffer drew upon her own mother in developing the relationship between the beautiful, free-spirited poet, Ingrid Magnussen, and her fifteen-year-old daughter, Astrid, in *White Oleander*. When creating the role of the thief Linus Caldwell in *Ocean’s Twelve*, Matt Damon rode the Paris subway in an attempt to observe pickpockets in action. Jeff Bridges based his immortal character in *The Big Lebowski* on the real “Dude,” Jeff Dowd. Virginia Madsen, who created the role of Maya in the film *Sideways*, spent a lot of time observing the California wine country and the people of Santa Ynez prior to shooting. Ron Eldard went on many “ride-alongs” with real policemen in preparing for his role as Lester in *House of Sand and Fog*. According to Russell Crowe in numerous interviews, he got ready for the role of Captain Jack Aubrey in *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* by spending three months learning to sail before shooting began on the film.

In numerous television and magazine interviews, recent Oscar nominees recalled their power of observation as sources of inspiration for their characters. In creating Staff Sergeant William James in *The Hurt Locker*, Jeremy Renner studied the rugged “old school action stars” and iconic war heroes. Morgan Freeman was handpicked by Nelson Mandela to play the South African president in *Invictus*. Freeman studied Mandela’s “entire life, what he believed, what he fought for, and how he survived to become Nelson Mandela.” In creating the real Julia Childs in *Julie & Julia*, Meryl Streep observed countless hours of footage of the chef, but she also looked to her own mother. “Julia, that spirit was very like my mother’s spirit. Joie de vivre. She had it. And a great sense of fun and an infectious ability to bring people along in whatever adventure she cared to take charge of.” Sean Penn studied the actual gay rights activist and California’s first openly gay elected official, Harvey Milk, for his portrayal of the title character in *Milk*. German actor Conrad Veidt’s 1928 portrayal of the character Gwynplaine in *The Man Who*

*Laughs* was the original inspiration for Batman's Joker. For his portrayal of the Joker in *The Dark Knight*, however, Heath Ledger cited nothing less than Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* and punk rocker Sid Vicious for inspiration. On becoming Father Flynn in the film *Doubt*, Philip Seymour Hoffman based his character on an actual teacher who had a profound impact on screenwriter John Patrick Shanley. Hoffman added his own interpretation, among other things, by going to church and observing priests.

Observing and getting to know the real woman for her portrayal of Leigh Anne Tuohy in *The Blind Side*, Sandra Bullock said in interviews, "You don't meet an energy like Leigh Anne's ever. She might not be famous here, but she's known in other places. I felt a great sense of fear in trying to tackle that person she is, but also a great sense of obligation to be true to this wonderful dynamic that exists between those people and their children that you wanted to pay homage to them. I wanted to do it as closely as I could, so I did my best."

Robert Downey, Jr.'s comic portrayal of Kirk Lazarus, a multiple-Oscar winner so committed to his craft that he literally transforms into a black man to portray a Vietnam soldier in the film within the film in Ben Stiller's *Tropic Thunder*. In creating the role, Downey recalled his own childhood observations. At three or four years old, Downey remembered his father, Robert Downey, Sr., directing a film, *Swope*, in which the director had to dub his own voice over that of an African-American actor in post-production. In creating Lazarus, Downey said the deep voice came from his vivid memories of watching his father make that film. He said, "I was in New York and the character [in his father's film] was supposed to be a Vietnam soldier, so I was remembering some of the folks who were hanging out in the West Village back then. Without it being too specific, I just started this gravelly, cool, very world-weary voice, and I said, 'Oh my God, I'm going to have a ball with this.'"

## EXERCISE 5.4

## OBSERVATION NOTEBOOK

- A. Each day during the next week, make a special effort to use your powers of observation. Start an observation notebook. Carefully note mannerisms, gestures, and ways of talking, walking, and eating that reveal character traits. Visit a busy railway station, hotel lobby, or some other place where you will have the opportunity to observe people of all ages. Practice reproducing details until you can do them accurately and until you feel you have captured some of the inner quality of the person. Again, remember to look for character traits with which you can relate to your own past and present external behavior. Attempt to discover their objectives by observing their physical actions.
- B. From one of these observations, prepare a complete character autobiography, answering all the appropriate questions, as discussed in Chapter 3 and more thoroughly in Chapter 8. Score the actions,

and define your objective and obstacle(s). Rehearse and present a short scene with imagined circumstances leading to action that you believe would be truthful for the character you create from the observed raw material.

- C. Observe a painting—an original, if you have access to a museum—that reveals character. Re-create with your own body the posture and the facial expression. Make the character move; imagine how he would walk, sit, and use his hands. If it is a period picture, read about the manners and customs of the period. Make him speak. Invent a scene in which you can bring the character to life in a sequence of actions.
- D. Write down your observations of a room belonging to an acquaintance or, better yet, to someone you are meeting for the first time. Study the furniture. Speculate on the reasons for its choice and its arrangement. Observe the style of the decoration. Are the colors carefully planned or haphazard? Is the room neat or disorderly? What feelings does the room evoke in you? What does it tell you about the person who occupies it?

## ADAPTING OBSERVATIONS THROUGH THE IMAGINATION

A piano has eighty-eight keys. Each one is capable of producing a solitary note. Any person of average intelligence can learn to play the individual notes. Most of us can even learn to put together basic chord combinations. However, it is only through the imagination of an artist that the individual notes and chords can be combined with an infinite variety of tempos and rhythms to create a spectrum of music. **Imagination** is the power of the mind to form an inner image or concept of something that is unreal or not present. As an actor, the building blocks for your imagination are always taken from your own experiences and observations. To stimulate your imagination, you must know how to retain observed behaviors, situations, and abstract qualities. Then you must have the ability to separate and recall your observations before creating a new combination for the stage. Great actors, like great scientists and painters, have enormous imaginations. In Steve Martin's comedy, *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*, young Pablo Picasso tells Albert Einstein, "There is nothing in my way anymore. If I can think it, I can draw it." A few moments later, referring to a realistic painting on the wall, they continue their debate on the creative imagination.

**Picasso:** ... I see it as an empty frame with something hideous in it that's waiting to be filled up with something NEW. (*He picks up a pencil and holds it like a foil.*) Advancing out into the unknown, the undrawn, the new thing must be coaxed out of its cave, wrestled with, and finally pinned up on the wall like a hide. When I look at Goya, it's like he is reaching his hand through the centuries to tap me on the shoulder. When I paint, I feel like I am reaching my hand forward hundreds of years to touch someone too....

**Einstein:** I work the same way. I make beautiful things with a pencil.



- Picasso:* You? You're just a scientist! For me, the shortest distance between two points is *not* a straight line!
- Einstein:* Likewise.
- Picasso:* (*still dancing*): Let's see one of your creations. (EINSTEIN *pulls out a pencil*. PICASSO ... *gets a pencil* ... *The others back away as if it were a Western shoot-out.*) Draw!
- Einstein:* Done! (*They swap drawings.*) It's perfect.
- Picasso:* Thank you.
- Einstein:* I'm talking about mine.
- Picasso:* (*He studies it.*) It's a formula.
- Einstein:* So's yours.
- Picasso:* It was a little hastily drawn ... Yours is letters.
- Einstein:* Yours is lines.
- Picasso:* My lines mean something.
- Einstein:* So do mine.
- Picasso:* Mine is beautiful.
- Einstein:* (*Indicates his own drawing.*) Men have swooned on seeing that.
- Picasso:* Mine touches the heart.
- Einstein:* Mine touches the head.
- Picasso:* (*Holds his drawing.*) Mine will change the future.<sup>11</sup>

The real Albert Einstein used his imagination by combining phenomena to discover natural laws, whereas the actual Pablo Picasso fed his imagination by drawing from life the most diverse aspects of it. Both men, through their imaginations, produced favorable conditions through which to express their creativity.

While onstage, your artistic imagination helps you find appropriate actions for your character. Your imagination uncovers the hidden recesses of your subconscious. It helps you to recall and then adapt your observations for the stage. Your observed memories, combined with your creative imagination, lead you to physical actions and ultimately to truthful emotion. For this reason, your imagination is one of your greatest gifts. Without imagination, there is no art.

Most adults do not exercise their imaginations. All children have a natural propensity to create. However, as we grow older, we become engrossed in the practical matters of daily existence. We are raised in a culture that suppresses the creative imagination. Ours is a world of "don't." "Don't behave like a child." "Don't show off in public." "Don't raise your voice." "Don't stand out in a crowd." We are a society of conformity. We have strict rules of behavior and customs. We must talk and dress like our friends. We are chastised for being different. Our learned perception of acceptable adult behavior is one of rational, conformist thought and controlled emotions. As an actor, you must reject this idea. You must constantly rekindle your imagination. You must not allow it to lie dormant in the darkest recesses of your mind. It must be exercised. Without it, creativity is not possible. When your imagination is unleashed,



you will rediscover your childlike ability to develop newly shaped inner images and abstract concepts that are appropriate to your onstage character.

Characters are works of fiction. Theatre is a secondary reality. It is not a slavish imitation of life on the stage because art demands invention. “The problem of the actor and his creative technique is, therefore, how to transform the fiction of the play into artistic stage reality,” writes Stanislavski scholar David Magarshack. “To do that, the actor needs imagination.” Your imagination is your dearest friend because imagination, with the help of the “magic if,” combined with the given circumstances and your personal history and observations, gives life to your creations. “An actor who has no imagination, Stanislavski declares, has either to develop it or leave the stage, for otherwise he will be entirely in the hands of the producers who will foist their own imaginations on him, which would be tantamount to his giving up his own creative work and becoming a mere puppet.”<sup>12</sup>

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## EXERCISE 5.5

### SUPPLYING CIRCUMSTANCES FOR OBSERVED BEHAVIOR

Make careful observations of human behavior. When you see a situation that stimulates your imagination, supply circumstances you can use as the basis for an improvisation. Why, for example, might a sailor in a nightclub be dancing with a child’s doll? Why might an old woman selling pencils on the street be reading a report on the New York Stock Exchange? Remember that the purpose of these imaginary circumstances is to provide a reason for action. Action means specific physical objectives that show believable behavior for the person observed. Work out the details carefully.

Rehearse the scene until each part seems right and logical. *Warning:* Do not attempt to substitute a “made-up” situation for the original observation. Without the observed fact, you have no way of knowing whether your imaginary circumstances are true. *Imagination must have a basis in reality.*

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## EXERCISE 5.6

### CREATIVE IMPULSES

- A. Creative impulses must be exercised. The instructor will give someone in the class a noun. Ordinary nouns such as *pizza* or *car* will not be used; instead, the instructor will give you a noun with extensive connotations such as *religion* or *politics*. Without preparation, you will then stand up and improvise on whatever the word suggests to you. Do not attempt to define the noun with your improvisation; it is simply your immediate reaction to the word. Your response may consist of one or more movements and may or may not include words or sounds. Anything goes, as long as it is short

and unplanned. When you finish, you will then give the next person a word, and she will repeat the process.

- B. Repeat the preceding exercise, only this time substitute a famous name instead of a noun. The person may be dead or alive, but it must be a person with whom everyone is familiar. You will then stand and improvisationally do something that reveals the essence of the character.
- C. The instructor will give you a single piece of fabric. You will then stand and create a recognizable character by the way in which you use the material. Don't just wrap the cloth over your head and proclaim yourself to be an Arab woman; rather, use the cloth in such a way that the class will know who you are portraying. (Note: This exercise can be repeated with any prop.)

## OBSERVING OBJECTS AND ANIMALS

The study of plants, animals, and inanimate objects as a means of understanding a character is a third way an actor may use the technique of observation. The process involves **abstraction**, a commonly misunderstood principle. To *abstract* means, literally, “to separate, to take away.” The actor applies the principle of abstraction by observing an object for the purpose of taking away from it qualities that will be useful in developing a character.

The qualities of elegance, glitter, and aloofness abstracted from the observation of a crystal chandelier might be important elements in coming to understand some of the characters in Restoration drama or a Noel Coward play. Observing, then abstracting, the comfortableness, the homeliness, and the unpretentiousness of an old leather chair might provide insight into a character of a completely different kind. Cate Blanchett abstracted the qualities of clouds, breezes, and wind while creating Galadriel, the elf queen, in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Her character left no footprints upon the earth.

Russell Crowe's brilliant portrayal of mathematician John Forbes Nash, Jr., in the feature film *A Beautiful Mind*, could be compared to a radiant computer that develops a virus. Based on a true story in Cold War America, the film lets us see the world through the eyes of Nash. His mind operates on a level that is beyond the comprehension of even the most educated people. Pictures, formulas, codes, and theories flash across his mind at lightning speed; this is reflected in the actor's eyes. However, as the film progresses, a virus infiltrates his computer-like mind, as the prominent mathematician begins to suffer more and more from schizophrenic hallucinations. The virus attacks the data in his brain, causing him to see, hear, and feel “virtual” people. Paranoid about the government, Nash finds hidden meaning in newspapers, magazines, and other documents of no significance. He believes there is a secret conspiracy against him, and he slips into madness until he is rescued by

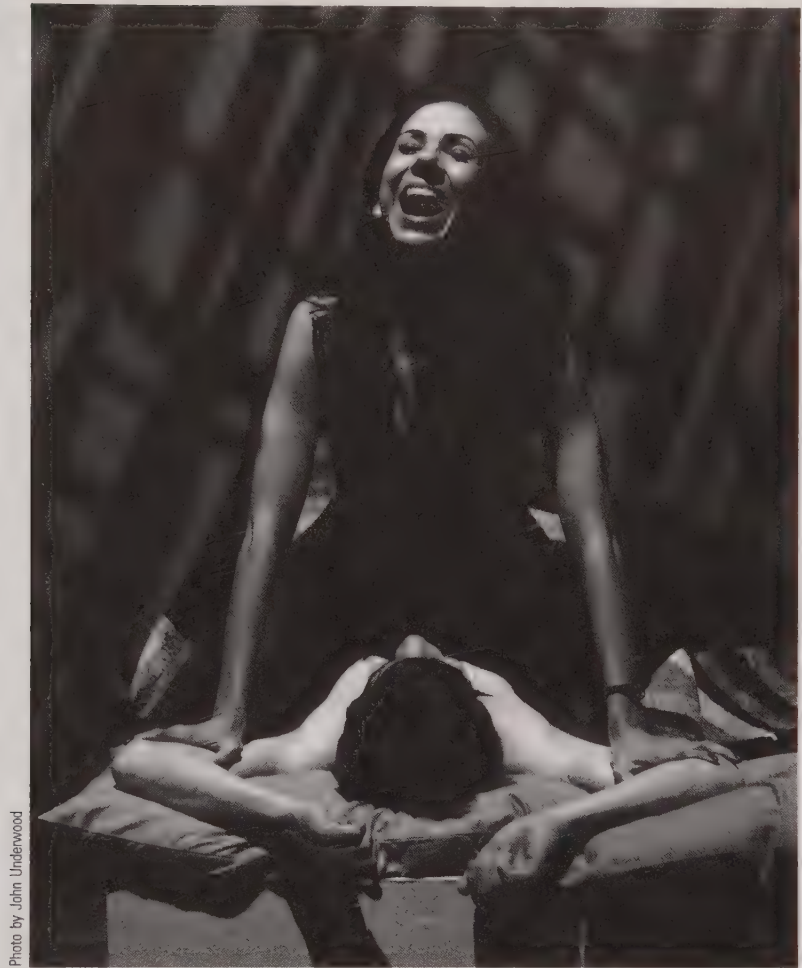


Photo by John Underwood

**FIGURE 5.3**

Mariana Fernandez (*top*) and Jordan Kubat in a scene from Purdue University's production of *The Shape of Things*. Directed by Kristine Holvedt; costume design by Joe Concha; lighting design by Krystle Smith; scenic design by Eric Luchen. In this scene, Ms. Fernandez displays animalistic qualities that were perhaps abstracted from observing wolves standing over their prey.

his wife's undying love. If a computer developed feelings, it would have the emotional coldness of Crowe's creation. If it had cognitive reasoning skills and could interpret images, it would be reflected in his eyes. If a damaged computer could walk, it would attempt to move with certainty in many directions simultaneously. If a computer's speech had emotional thought behind it, it would sound like the distant thoughts of Crowe's interpretation of Nash.

## EXERCISE 5.7

## MOVEMENT ABSTRACTED FROM INANIMATE OBJECTS

Working as a group, move about your acting studio as if you were a person with the abstracted qualities in the following list:

- a cloud
- a computer
- an eggplant
- a chandelier
- an old tennis shoe
- a sailboat
- a crystal wine glass
- an oak tree
- a knife
- Play-Doh
- a doormat
- a freight train
- a superball
- a whip
- a gentle breeze
- a bulldozer
- a kite
- a tornado
- a sports car
- burlap material
- a tuba
- a piccolo
- a mink stole
- a flower
- a stump
- an egg
- taffy
- ice
- silk fabric
- any inanimate object

Remember that you can observe through all of your senses, not just through sight. Besides considering how the object looks, consider how it feels, how it smells, how heavy it is, and possibly how it tastes. Think of all its characteristic qualities. Remember, you are not trying to make yourself believe you are an eggplant or a crystal wine glass or silk fabric; rather, you are abstracting the essential qualities through your imagination and incorporating them into a person with those characteristics.

People are often compared to animals. We say that a certain young girl is kittenish, that a certain person is as clumsy as a bear, that one man is foxy, another is wolfish, and that still another is a snake in the grass. These comparisons are examples of abstracting an animal's essential qualities and applying them to aspects of human behavior. An actor will find that creating such abstractions from animals is another worthwhile exercise in observation that can provide outstanding raw material for characterizations.

We can easily draw parallels between Tobey McGuire's character in *Spiderman* with that of an arachnid. Halle Berry's portrayal of the title role in *Catwoman* is certainly based on a feline. Remember, however, that Tom Hanks modeled his character, Josh Baskin, in *Big* on his more subtle abstracted observations of a newborn giraffe with "spindly heads that look geeky when they run." In the motion picture *Seven*, Kevin Spacey played a psychopathic serial killer with extremely subtle abstracted qualities. Like a snake patiently stalking its prey, Spacey demonstrated an amazing ability to simultaneously express spine-chilling villainy, laconic indifference, and limitless superiority with merely a few gestures and vocal inflections. Jeff Bridges, who played the Alien in the film *Starman*, considered this one of his most unique challenges. As a person from outer space, he had nothing on which to base his character. In dealing with the development of the alien, who has assumed the body of Jenny Hayden's (Karen Allen) dead husband, Bridges relied on his own studies and observations and, working with director John



Carpenter, created a highly intelligent explorer whose physical movement can only be described as birdlike.

A famous, classic example of observing the qualities of animals and applying them to dramatic characters in plays is found in Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, a vicious satire on greed. Each character is appropriately named after some beast of prey. Volpone, or the Fox, is a rich merchant whose ruling passion is greed. Like his namesake, he is also sly and has hit on a scheme of pretending he is dying so his equally rapacious friends will court his favor with extravagant gifts in the hope of being made his heirs. His friends include Corvino, or Little Crow, who offers Volpone his young wife; Corbaccio, or Old Crow, who sniffs at Volpone's body to make sure he is dead; and Voltore, or the Vulture, who is exactly what his name implies. Slyest of all is Mosca, or the Fly, who turns the tables on Volpone by trying to prove him legally dead. Actors performing these roles would certainly want to find true human behavior that could be abstracted imaginatively from observing the behavior of the animal associated with each character.

An actress preparing for the role of Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, by Tennessee Williams, might do well to study not the panther but the alley cat. Because Maggie is the "cat" of the title, once again the script provides the starting place for this exploration. Maggie struggles to bring life back into her alcoholic husband with the cunning, persistence, and sensuality of a feline. She has scratched and clawed her way out of poverty, and she is determined to hang on to her marriage, with the tenacity of an alley cat struggling to stay alive in the streets. Hear Maggie purr when it becomes necessary. Her attempts to seduce her husband Brick and flatter Big Daddy are catlike. When Maggie walks, imagine her whole body in motion with feline grace. When she is spiteful, see her claws emerge from their sheath. The actress working on the part will note the human qualities in cats as well as the feline qualities in humans.

*Equus*, by Peter Shaffer, provides yet another subtle example. This play deals with the psychiatric case history of Alan Strang, a seventeen-year-old who has blinded six horses with a metal spike. In the course of the play, the trauma peels away as he relives the experience. Because Alan has a love-hate relationship with horses, the actor might want to observe and catalog the characteristic behavior of these animals as he prepares to play the role. Some potentially usable abstractions might be nervousness; skittishness; restlessness (especially true of a young colt); gracefulness of motion; head carried high, moving from side to side to observe the world; wariness; and rollicking playfulness. Experimenting with these qualities could be a useful springboard when creating the character.

The observation of animals and objects will become an important part of your arsenal of rehearsal techniques. After penetratingly observing an animal, bringing as many of the senses as you can into play, you should attempt to create, in so far as it is humanly possible, the physical and emotional attributes of the animal. If you enter into animal study freely and with an open mind, such stretching of the imagination should then allow you to create a human character who possesses many traits you observed in the animal.

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**FIGURE 5.4**

Brian Normoyle as Pride in the Utah Shakespearean Festival's 2005 production of *Doctor Faustus*. In addition to physical form, note this actor's right arm and his overall reptilian-like abstraction.

Animal exercises can often put you in touch with feelings and emotions that have heretofore been strange to you. Of course, if animal study is to be useful in developing a specific character in a play, you need to make certain that the animal traits can be justified by the script. No external characterization tool can substitute for careful study of the given circumstances of the text; therefore, animal improvisations should never be used until after you have selected images and actions for the basic makeup of your character. After this step has been accomplished, applying the sensations that grow out of the study of pertinent animals and objects can help you discover the unique manner in which your character performs his or her actions.

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## EXERCISE 5.8

### MOVEMENT ABSTRACTED FROM ANIMALS

Working as a group, move about your acting studio as if you were a person with the following abstracted qualities:

- |                     |                     |                    |
|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| • a moth            | • an orangutan      | • an exotic bird   |
| • a chicken         | • a cow             | • a mouse          |
| • a gorilla         | • an elephant       | • a skunk          |
| • a lion            | • a snake           | • a sparrow        |
| • a pig             | • a domestic kitten | • a rabbit         |
| • an otter          | • a wolf            | • a squirrel       |
| • a bear            | • a prairie dog     | • a beaver         |
| • a dog (any breed) | • a woodpecker      | • a horse          |
| • a tropical fish   | • a fox             | • a flamingo       |
| • a fly             | • a crow            | • any other animal |

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## EXERCISE 5.9

### CREATING A SCORE FROM ABSTRACTION

Plan a short individual scene, either with or without lines, in which you develop a score of physical actions for a character with the qualities of an animal or inanimate object. Use your imagination to supply circumstances that would require the person to act in a true and revealing manner. Carrying out these actions will help you to believe you are a person with the same characteristics as your chosen animal or inanimate object.

# CHAPTER 6

## Exploring Circles of Attention

*"If the actor is in the center of a pond, the ripples he creates radiate out in an increasing circumference that will eventually embrace the whole pond."*

**Constantin Stanislavski**

Most people, under ordinary circumstances, have relatively short attention spans. A few people, however, have the ability to concentrate for long periods of time, sometimes longer than their physical bodies can tolerate. A race car driver must have the ability to focus for hours on end while moving at speeds in excess of 200 miles per hour with only inches separating his car from his opponent's. Any lapse of concentration means certain failure—or worse. Only after the race is complete can the winning driver physically relax and enjoy his victory. Every actor must have this same basic mental strength, the ability to concentrate for long periods of time while surrounded by infinite distractions. **Concentration** separates great acting from good acting.

As an actor onstage, you cannot put yourself into a trance or wrap yourself in a cocoon against the onslaught of outside disruptions. As you embody your character, you remain aware of the auditorium you can see and the publicness of your performance. You would have to be quite insane to forget these distracting elements. However, you must not allow the audience to adversely affect your behavior and your carefully selected artistic choices. Great actors are bound by their ability to focus their attention on the actions of their characters. The moment your attention drifts into the audience, you "get into your own head" and lose control onstage. On the other hand, the instant you withdraw your attention from the audience, you have power over them. You compel them to take an active interest in your onstage activities.



Whether in rehearsal or in performance, you must surround yourself with what Stanislavski referred to as a **circle of attention**. While focusing on your actions, you are aware of the outer forces; however, you must restrict your circle of attention by “concentrating on what comes within this sphere, and only half consciously seizing on what comes within its aura.” You must have control over this imaginary bubble—this ring of concentration. It must be “elastic.” You must be able to expand and contract your attention as the theatrical moment necessitates.<sup>1</sup>

Concentration helps you relax by properly channeling your energies toward the accomplishment of a specific goal. It is also the principal means of commanding the audience’s attention. The audience must see what you want them to see and hear what you want them to hear during every moment of performance. Otherwise, the spectators’ attention may wander casually around the stage or stray to other points in the auditorium. Their minds, like your own, may drift to personal situations that have nothing to do with stage events.



Photo by Kenneth L. Stilson

### FIGURE 6.1

Cody Heuer (left) and Brittany Kriger in a scene from Southeast Missouri State University’s production of *Sweet Charity*. Directed by Kenneth L. Stilson; costume and scenic design by Rhonda Weller-Stilson; lighting design by Phil Nacy. The specific and intense focus of these actors demands the attention of the viewer.

Fortunately, the audience wants to follow the story. Their attention corresponds with your involvement in specific actions. *Attention demands attention*. However, concentration, like the “creative state,” is easier to talk about than to do. Too many young actors resemble the fellow described by Stephen Leacock who jumped on his horse and rode off in all directions. Their attention is scattered to all points of the compass. Their minds wander from the stage to the audience to the wings to their next line to an upcoming scene to a past mistake, and so on. They do well to focus 10 percent of their attention on anything related to the action, thus dissipating 90 percent of their mental energy.

You can make full use of your talent only by learning to focus your energies. Creativity, whether in rehearsal or during repeated performances, demands complete concentration of both your inner and outer faculties.<sup>2</sup> Successful actors achieve maximum concentration. They find ways to control their attention despite the pressure of the audience, the distraction of backstage activities, and the mechanical demands of the role.

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## EXERCISE 6.1

### DISTRACTIONS

Any activity that requires concentration, especially in the presence of distracting influences, is excellent discipline for actors. People training for the stage need to develop their powers of attention through increasingly complicated exercises. As with all exercises, however, their value is derived only when they are practiced *regularly* over a period of time. No exercise has served its purpose until it can be done satisfactorily with a minimum of effort. Students of Stanislavski suggest the following kinds of activities for improving your ability to concentrate:

- A. Read expository material in the presence of a group that constantly tries to interrupt and distract. Hold yourself responsible for remembering each detail you have read.
- B. Solve mathematical problems under the same conditions.
- C. Present a memorized passage of prose or poetry under the same conditions.

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## EXERCISE 6.2

### ADD-A-WORD

- A. With a group sitting in a circle, one person says the first noun that comes to mind. The next person repeats the word and adds another word. The third person repeats those two words and adds another, and so on. Use only nouns because they are easier to remember. Stay in the present. Do not try to think ahead. See in your mind what you have heard; associate the word with the person who said it; and add a noun suggested by the image of

the words that preceded it so that a continuous logical story may develop. For example:

- cigarette
- cigarette, woman
- cigarette, woman, nightclub
- cigarette, woman, nightclub, peanuts, and so on

The process continues around and around the circle until no one is able to repeat the entire series. Anyone who fails is eliminated.

- B. Under similar circumstances, play a game of numbers. The numbers may be unrelated, or you may progress by having each person add three or seven, eleven or nineteen. The game can become quite challenging.

### EXERCISE 6.3

### BODY COORDINATION

Concentrate on coordination of arm movements. With the left arm fully extended, continue making a large circle in the air; with the right arm, continue making a square by extending it straight out from the shoulder, then up, and then to the side. When coordination is established, reverse the arms, making the circle with the right arm and the square with the left.

## CHANNELING YOUR ENERGY

For you, the actor, a circle is the degree of concentration on a single sequence of actions in which all your nerves are brought into focus. Your entire body is working in the same direction, attracting all your powers of observation to itself. All artists must master the power to concentrate. This is particularly true for the actor.

Attention may be either internal or external. The main function of internal attention is to fuel your imagination, whereas external attention helps you to focus your mind on onstage activity, thus distracting you from the horrifying black hole called the proscenium arch. Through exercise, it is absolutely essential that you learn to fix your attention onstage to prevent your mind from drifting into the audience. Through your “sixth sense,” you remain aware of their presence, but you must acquire the technique that allows you to focus your attention so firmly on your character’s thoughts and actions that the audience no longer has any adverse effects on your behavior. In short, you must learn how to *see* onstage. “For the eye of the actor who knows how to look and see attracts the attention of the spectators, concentrating it on the object they too have to look at,” wrote Stanislavski. “The empty gaze of an actor, on the other hand, merely diverts the attention of the spectators from the stage.”

As a means to teach actors to channel their energy while onstage, Stanislavski developed his now famous theory on “circles of attention.” An actor must have a point of attention, and this point must not be in the audience. The more engaging the action, the more it focuses the attention. Stanislavski wrote, “In real life, there are always plenty of objects that fix our attention, but conditions in the theatre are different, and interfere with an actor’s living normal, so that an effort to fix attention becomes necessary.”<sup>3</sup>

Stanislavski demonstrated his point to his students by turning off all the lights in his classroom, leaving it in complete darkness. He then turned on a small lamp, illuminating the center of a table where a number of small objects had been placed. With the students watching, he carefully examined each item. “Make a note immediately of your mood,” he said. “It is solitude because you are divided from us by the ‘small circle of attention.’ During a performance, before an audience of thousands, you can always enclose yourself in this circle like a snail in its shell.” It is easy to examine the smallest details of the objects within its circumference, live with the most intimate feelings and desires, carry out the most complicated actions, solve the most difficult problems, and analyze one’s feelings and thoughts. In addition, it is possible in such a circle to establish close communication with another person in it, confide to him one’s most intimate thoughts, recall the past, and dream of the future. Stanislavski described an actor’s state of mind in such an imaginary circle of attention as **public solitude**. It is public, he points out, because the whole audience is with the actor all the time, and it is solitude because he is separated from it by his small circle of attention. During a performance, the actor can always withdraw himself to his small circle of attention and, as it were, retire into his solitude, like a snail into its shell.

He then expanded the area of illumination but concentrated his attention on performing the same score of actions. He called this the “medium circle of attention.” Finally, he flooded the entire classroom with light—the “large circle of attention”—but again focused his attention on the same score of actions.

When the lights are on you have an entirely different problem. As there is no obvious outline to your circle, you are obliged to construct one mentally and not allow yourself to look beyond it. Your attention must now replace the light, holding you within certain limits, and this despite the drawing power of all sorts of objects now visible outside of it.<sup>4</sup>

Although you are aware of the medium and large circles of attention, the small circle of attention allows you to focus 90 percent of your mental energy on the stage action; thus, the audience will more likely follow the story without distraction.

With the widening of this field of awareness, the area of your attention is also broadened. This, however, can go on only as long as you can keep your attention fixed within the imaginary circle. The moment the circumference of the circle becomes blurred, you must narrow the circle to the limits of your visual attention. You must acquire an unconscious, mechanical habit of transferring your attention from the smaller to the larger circle without breaking it.



Photo by Kenneth L. Stilson

**FIGURE 6.2**

Maria Bartolotta (*left*) and Jake Ferree in a scene from Southeast Missouri State University's production of *Boys' Life*. Directed by Desmond Gray. Note the sense of communion between these two actors, as the small circle of attention allows them to truthfully portray an intimate moment of public solitude.

You have to remember, the bigger and emptier your large circle, the more compact your middle and small circles must be inside it.<sup>5</sup> The way to rescue yourself from the most terrible moment of panic onstage is to focus your energy on your score within the small circle of attention. The more distracted you are by outside forces, the more isolated your solitude must be.

## EXERCISE 6.4

### EXPANDING AND CONTRACTING CIRCLES

Begin with the 4-7-8 Breathing Exercise from Chapter 2. Lying on your back, place one hand on your abdomen and the other on your chest. Close your eyes, breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth. Begin by slowly inhaling, smoothly and deeply to a mental count of four seconds. Hold your breath while counting to seven. Slowly and smoothly exhale while mentally counting to eight. As you exhale, try to release your anxiety, tension, and stress. Once you have regulated your breathing, follow the lead of your instructor as you embark on an aural expedition inside and outside your body.

- A. Begin by focusing your attention on breathing. Listen to the sounds you make as you inhale and exhale. Listen to your body. Try to hear your own heartbeat. Pay attention to the ticks, the rumbles, the creaks, and so on. Imagine what is happening inside.
- B. On your instructor's cue, expand your focus to include your classroom. Focus on the air conditioning or heat system and other ambient sounds in the room. Listen to others around you. Notice their breathing, sniffing, coughing, clearing of throats, or shifting of weight. If you didn't notice prior to the exercise, imagine what your classmates are wearing, what is shifting in their pockets, and what accessories hang from their necks, wrists, and fingers. If your instructor is moving around the space, listen to her footsteps and movements. Try to imagine where she is in the room. What kind of shoes is she wearing? Does she take long, slow strides or short, quick steps? Does she lift her feet or shuffle her heels as she walks?
- C. Expand your circle to include the entire building. Listen to footsteps walking past the door, the murmur of people chatting or singing, telephones ringing, doors opening and closing, the sound of copy machines, and so on. Imagine what is happening and what is being said. Try to place yourself in the circumstances outside your room.
- D. Now enlarge your circle of attention to include sounds outside the building: a dog barking, people engaged in conversations or activities, a train whistle, passing cars, an airplane, the wind, rain, a clap of thunder. Again, transport yourself outside the room, trying to place yourself in new circumstances on which you can only imagine through sound.
- E. Now reverse the process by shrinking your circles of attention from outside to inside the building. Following your instructor's direction, bring your focus back into the room, before bringing your circle of attention back to the sound of your own body. Note how your self-perception has changed after the imaginative and acoustic voyage you have just undertaken outside your own body.

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## EXERCISE 6.5

### CONCENTRATING ON ACTION

Much of this book has been devoted to the importance of action. In earlier exercises, you were asked to write down—make a score of—the physical actions you would undertake if you were in the situation of an imaginary character. Actions are tangible and specific for both the actor and the audience, bringing a character to life and revealing the dramatic events of the play. Because actions are never divorced from specific desires, their advantage lies not just in the actions themselves but also in the meanings and feelings they have the power to evoke.

Good dramatists provide ample chances for actors to concentrate their attention on performing physical action. Sometimes the action is to

satisfy a simple desire, and sometimes actors must find a logical pattern of action to satisfy their characters' pressing needs. Good actors and directors display great imagination in inventing physical action organic to the character and the situation.

Plan and rehearse a score of physical actions for the following problems. Work on the exercise until you can repeat the score without any feeling of distraction from outside influences—the medium and large circles of attention—and until you are satisfied that every bit of your energy is concentrated on carrying out the action—the small circle of attention. Supply additional circumstances, giving yourself specific details that lead you to believe your actions.

As always, write out your score, making certain that the scene has a logical beginning, middle, and end. Define your objective and obstacle(s), and perform your score with the greatest possible economy, discarding any details that do not help in achieving your goal.

- A. In front of a mirror, you apply the finishing touches before leaving your apartment to go on a first date.
- B. While exercising, you pull a muscle in your back.
- C. In the middle of a telephone interview, your cell phone loses a signal.
- D. You are searching for a lost article that is very important to you.
- E. Working on an important homework assignment, your laptop crashes.
- F. After breaking something in your new girlfriend's (or boyfriend's) apartment, you secretly attempt to cover your mistake by repairing the damage.
- G. While folding your fiancée's laundry, you discover an article of clothing that does not belong to either of you.
- H. Late on a cold and windy winter evening, you try to stay warm while standing on a street corner waiting for a bus.
- I. Alone in a bar, you discreetly attempt to attract the attention of a person you want to meet.
- J. Physically ill, you try to study for an important examination.
- K. You are packing your suitcase in preparation for running away from home.
- L. While dressing for an important dinner engagement, you discover a stain on your clothing.
- M. Recovering from a serious illness, you take your first steps.

## RELATING TO OBJECTS

Although effective acting involves carrying out a sequence of logical and truthful actions, your ultimate goal is not to perform the action itself but to reveal its significance. The final interest of the audience is not in the events of the play—important as they are—but in the underlying meaning of the characters' relationships.



Consider Goethe's most famous drama, *Faust*, in which the old scholar has sold his soul to the devil in return for a year of restored youth. One of the youthful pleasures he seeks is the seduction of the innocent Marguerite. To help achieve this aim, he leaves a casket of jewels where Marguerite is certain to find them. She does so in the company of Martha, her older and more experienced neighbor. Here is the material for a stunning scene, but it will be meaningful to the audience only if they understand the relationship of the jewels to Marguerite and her neighbor and the effect of Faust's actions on both ladies. The actors involved in this scene have something on which to focus their attention—the jewels. The meaning behind the jewels and both ladies' relationship to the objects serves to set in motion the actors' creativity as they begin to score the scene. "Imagined circumstances can transform the object itself and heighten the reaction of your emotions to it," wrote Stanislavski. "You must learn to transfigure an object from something which is coldly reasoned or intellectual in quality into something which is warmly *felt*."<sup>6</sup>

*Faust* offers the actors playing Marguerite and Martha a wonderful opportunity to engage in an intellectual and sensory observation of the jewels. They must experience the color, shape, and brilliance, the feel of them dripping through their hands, and the way they look hung about their necks and from their ears. Because the *prop* jewels are not real, the actors can—through remembered observation or *sense memory*—give the quality, the beauty, and fire of precious stones to the counterfeit jewels.

The actors, however, must not stop there. They must also "transfigure" the jewels into something that is "warmly felt," to make emotional connections among themselves, their characters, and the objects. They (especially Martha) are overcome with the beauty of the stones. They desire them; they covet them. The jewels become a burning temptation, a successful lure in Faust's seduction. In the hands of professional actors, these important objects perform a key dramatic function in the total action of the scene. In both rehearsal and performance, the actors use their relationship with these objects to trigger their imaginations and to induce believable actions and consequent feelings.

The same object, of course, can evoke a variety of responses, depending on the character and the circumstances. Consider the relationship of a casket of jewels to a hungry beggar. What is the relationship of this object to a wealthy dowager contemplating a purchase? What about a customs inspector or a jewel thief? Good playwrights and directors are skillful and imaginative in supplying onstage objects that help the actor find the truth of a scene. Such objects achieve their fullest meaning when, like the jewels in *Faust*, they are both logical and dramatically symbolic.

Think of the opening scene of Shakespeare's great tragedy, *King Lear*. When the aging monarch literally gives away his kingdom, his action must be clear to the audience, but the real significance lies in the effect of his actions on him and the people surrounding him. Lear's throne, his crown, and the sword of state carried before him all symbolize the kingdom, which is his source of power and which he is now about to give away. The map depicting the newly divided kingdom visually represents the freedom from the cares of state Lear seeks in his old age; it is also a lure that entices his daughters to





Photo by Karl Hugh. Copyright Utah Shakespearean Festival

### FIGURE 6.3

Summer Sloan (*left*) as Mary Lennox and James Sargent as Dicon in the Utah Shakespearean Festival's 2009 production of *The Secret Garden*. Staying within the small circle of attention, the actors in this scene have established a special relationship with the potted flower on the ground between them, turning it into something warmly felt.

flatter his vanity by making boundless declarations of love before the assembled court. Shattered by Cordelia's refusal, Lear rashly changes his plan and violently tears the map. The actor who can personalize Lear's relation to these objects—transfigure them into something that is “warmly felt”—will find them to be a dependable stimulus for believable actions and true emotions.

You must also learn to relate to your character's clothing and to the imaginary environment. The character's clothing must be a part of your very existence. You must not treat your clothes as mere costumes that were recently hanging in the dressing room but rather as if your character personally selected them. Your work with your character's clothing will, in fact, communicate directly how your character feels about himself and his surroundings. In the same manner, you must find ways to relate to various aspects of your environment. Like onstage objects, the environment must be logical and symbolic and stimulate action. However, until you define your relationship to your surroundings, it will simply be scenery with no significant meaning. A door, for example, is merely a decoration until you, the actor, use it. Only then will it be given definition in relationship to your character, the play, and the particular scene. All the techniques by which you can instill an object

with rich meanings can apply equally to your character's clothing and environment.

Many of the greatest moments in drama supply the actor with an opportunity to use the technique of relating to objects. Continuing with Shakespeare, think of (1) Othello and the candle just before he murders Desdemona: "Put out the light, and then put out the light"; (2) Hamlet and the skull, as he talks about the transitory nature of life: "Alas! poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio ..."; (3) Lady Macbeth and her hands, which, in her deranged mind, she believes are covered with the blood of the murdered Duncan: "Out, damned spot! Out, I say!"; and (4) Shylock and the knife he is sharpening on the sole of his shoe to cut out a pound of Antonio's flesh. Shylock's action motivates Bassanio's "Why dost thou whet thy knife so earnestly?"—a gentle reminder from Shakespeare that the actor playing Shylock should be concentrating on his physical action with the object.

## EXERCISE 6.6

## SCORING A SEQUENCE WITH OBJECTS

Working alone, score and present a logical sequence of actions that centers on one or more objects. You must supply given circumstances that will provide you with a specific relationship to the object(s). Make sure you have a definite objective and that you work against an obstacle. You should also consider the essential qualities of the object(s) and the human and environmental conditions discussed in Chapter 5. You may base your scenes around the suggested actions listed here or create your own:

- reading a book (or an e-mail or text message)
- working on your laptop (Word document, e-mail, *Facebook*, or *Twitter*)
- searching through a box (or drawer)
- counting a large sum of money
- writing a note or sending an e-mail or text message (thank you, invitation, suicide, love letter, and so on)
- setting the table
- trying on clothing (or hats or shoes)
- sharpening a knife
- putting on makeup
- looking at a piece of jewelry
- looking at a photograph (electronic or hard copy)
- folding your boyfriend's (or girlfriend's) laundry
- taking prescribed medicine (or illegal drugs)
- packing a box or suitcase
- applying lotion (suntan or moisturizing)
- drinking shots of liquor
- repairing a piece of equipment or electronic device
- eating a distasteful food (or drink)

## INFECTING YOUR PARTNER

To excite an audience, actors must excite one another. Stanislavski wrote: “Infect your partner! Infect the person you are concentrating on! Insinuate yourself into his very soul, and you will find yourself the more infected for doing so. And if you are infected everyone else will be even more infected.”<sup>7</sup> A lion has the power to stalk, attack, and seize its prey without distraction. You must have the same power to seize with your eyes, ears, and senses. As an actor, if you must listen, listen intently. If you are to smell, smell hard. Do not simply gaze at another person, but look into her soul. Infect that person.

“The eye is the mirror of the soul,” wrote Stanislavski. “The vacant eye is the mirror of the empty soul.”<sup>8</sup> While onstage, your eyes should reflect the deep inner content of your character’s soul. Therefore, you must build great inner resources to correspond to the life of a human soul in your characters. Each moment onstage, you must share these spiritual resources with the other actors in the play. This is **communion**. It is like an underground river, which flows continuously under the surface of both words and silences, forming an invisible bond between two human beings. The communion established between actors is the surest source of stimulation, leading to a rewarding theatre experience for the audience.

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### EXERCISE 6.7

#### TWO-PERSON MIRRORS

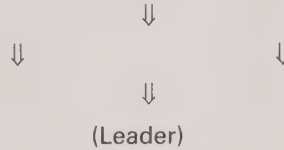
Do a sequence of “Mirror Exercises,” in which two people stand opposite each other; one makes a movement, while the other mirrors him or her precisely without delay. The effect is that of synchronized swimming, in which partners move at the exact same time.

- A. At first, do a “Movement Mirror” with abstract, nonrepresentational movements.
- B. Now change roles by switching who leads and who mirrors.
- C. Now you are both leaders and both mirrors. Work off your partner, and do not attempt to merely lead or follow.
- D. Go back to one leader and one mirror, but add realistic physical tasks such as running your fingers through your hair, cleaning your nails, or setting your watch.
- E. Return to abstract, nonrepresentational movements with one person serving as the leader and the other person mirroring the first person’s actions.
- F. Extend the previous exercise into a “Sound and Movement Mirror,” in which, along with the movements, the leader utters repetitive but constantly changing nonsensical sounds that are mirrored by the partner.
- G. Again, change leaders.
- H. Finally, you are both leaders and both mirrors with your “Sound and Movement Mirror.”

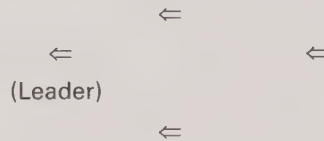
### EXERCISE 6.8

## FOUR-PERSON MIRROR

Begin with four performers facing the same direction.



The down center person begins as the leader, with the other three mirroring her movements. She remains the leader until her head crosses an imaginary  $45^\circ$  line either left or right, at which point that person becomes the new leader. For example, in the diagram below, the original leader's head has crossed  $45^\circ$  to the right, passing the leadership to that person.



The stage right person remains the leader until his head crosses the imaginary 45° line, passing the leadership either to the person on his right or back to the original leader on his left. This exercise continues until everyone has served as the leader at least two times.

Onstage relationships may be characterized as the process of conflict between partners. In any given scene, each character is attempting to impose her point of view, her position on the given subject through a sequence of physical actions. Each character listens and evaluates her opponent's resistance. She watches his actions, listens to his words and intonations, and then decides how to react with a look, a gesture, a word, or a movement that most effectively upholds her position in the conflict. If you are truly engaged in the onstage action, you will not simply wait for your cue to react, but you will have a continuous communion through words and behavior between you and your partner. Even when you are not speaking, you will be engaged in a silent struggle, trying to influence his thoughts and actions.

Conflict produces action. Conflict is always between characters; therefore, your action must always be directed toward your partner. You are trying to persuade, seduce, elevate, destroy, subordinate, or calm his desire, his will. You are trying to change his way of thinking, to alter his actions to meet your desire. Thus, theatrical action cannot exist without *conflict*, and conflict cannot exist without *communion* between partners who are trying to mutually influence each other through words and behavior. Every moment



you are onstage, it is your responsibility to infect your partner, to influence his behavior, and to make him adapt to your point of view. Every person onstage will have unique attitudes toward a subject. The concepts of action, conflict, and communion are not synonymous, but they are inseparable. Stanislavski determined that the nature of communion is “an interaction between partners in the process of a struggle on the stage. This means that the actor performs his action to elicit from his partner some concrete real behavior, which he needs to attain his own concrete real goal.”<sup>9</sup>

Shakespeare’s plays, as complex as they are, still center around elemental conflicts of will. *King Lear* begins with Lear’s attempt to force his will on his daughters by requiring extravagant declarations of love from them. Othello’s tragedy comes from Iago’s determination to ruin his contentment, and *The Taming of the Shrew* is a straightforward clash between the robust wills of Katherina and Petruchio. In *The Winter’s Tale*, Hermione’s honor and life depend on her ability to convince her husband he is wrong in suspecting her of being unfaithful. In Act II, Scene i of *Hamlet*, a frightened Ophelia explains to her father a recent encounter with young Prince Hamlet:

He took me by the wrist and held me hard;  
Then goes he to the length of all his arm,  
And, with his other hand thus o’er his brow,  
He falls to such perusal of my face  
As he would draw it. Long stay’d he so.  
At last, a little shaking of mine arm,  
And thrice his head thus waving up and down,  
He rais’d a sigh so piteous and profound  
As it did seem to shatter all his bulk  
And end his being. That done, he lets me go,  
And with his head over his shoulder turn’d  
He seem’d to find his way without his eyes,  
For out o’ doors he went without their help  
And to the last bended their light on me.

We sense, in these lines, the wordless communion between Hamlet and Ophelia.

When you engage in communion with your fellow actors by trying to influence their behavior, you establish an emotional relationship. Both consciously and unconsciously, you make logical adjustments to each of your partners, and such adjustments depend on an awareness of the other’s presence and personality. Often the techniques for relating to objects are equally useful in accomplishing objectives that require you to commune with another person. You use these techniques to “transfigure” your partner into someone who is “warmly felt.”

We are frequently faced, both in life and onstage, with the problem of evoking the same responses from two or more people toward whom we have dissimilar relationships. Again, the opening scene of *King Lear* provides a good example. Lear wants to induce his three daughters to shower him with love, but he has a different relationship with each of his offspring.



Photo by Kenneth L. Stilson

### FIGURE 6.4

A scene from Southeast Missouri State University's production of *Big River*. Directed by Kenneth L. Stilson; costume design by Rhonda Weller-Stilson; lighting design by Phil Nacy; scenic design by Jeffrey Luetkenhaus. This story takes place in Mark Twain's head as the pages unfold before the audience. With that, note the ensemble work by this group of actors in the first act finale.

He knows that Goneril is shrewd, cold, ambitious, and willing to do whatever is necessary to gain a share of the kingdom. Regan is a follower who wants what Goneril has and will do what Goneril does. Cordelia, on the other hand, is straightforward and honest; her protestation of love can be assumed to be genuine. Lear's vanity requires a public declaration of love from each of the three, but he uses a different strategy in each case to get it. Toward Goneril, the actor playing Lear may establish a kind of bargaining relationship: Tell me you love me, and I'll give you a share of my kingdom. Because Regan's response is so predictable, he might approach her with indifference, perhaps even mingled with contempt. To make the scene have the proper impact, he will most likely seek honest love from Cordelia, for he is depending on her for comfort in the loneliness of his advancing age.

These relationships are merely suggestions. The actor playing Lear establishes relationships that will work for him by (1) probing his imagination for an answer to the question: “If I were King Lear, what would I do in these circumstances to get Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia to behave as I want them to?” and (2) responding honestly to the immediate attempts of the actors playing the daughters to influence his behavior. Spontaneous responses between actors are the principal sources of vitality in any performance.

The process of developing a communion between actors is a technique that aspiring actors should thoroughly explore and practice. When mastered, this technique allows you to behave toward the other actors as if you believe they are the characters they play and simultaneously to make full use of your sensory and intellectual responses to each as a person. If, for example, the actor playing Lear tries to relate to nothing but a preconceived image of his daughters rather than “working off” his actual partners, he will quite simply be “alone” onstage with other actors. Acting requires **ensemble**, and ensemble requires the equal participation of everyone onstage. Hence the saying, “There are no small roles, only small actors.” Just as a lifeline connects mountain climbers to one another as they ascend great heights, actors onstage are connected to their partners by the ensemble. If one person “falls,” his partner must “save” him. Attempting to perform alone onstage alongside other people deprives the actor of the stimulation that comes from genuine relationships with fellow performers. The actor playing Lear must respond as fully as he can to the palpable qualities of the others with whom he is playing. If he were to play Lear again with different actresses performing the daughters, his performance would take on a new set of nuances, yet each performance would have equal truth and vitality.

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## EXERCISE 6.9

### THE INVISIBLE ANTENNAE

Communion is a state of absolute connection with self, the other actors, and the audience. Using no words and limited facial expressions, gestures, and physical actions, create a circumstance in which an engaged couple have quarreled and are not speaking to one another. Seat them as far apart as possible. In the beginning, the young woman pretends not to see him, but she does so in such a way as to attract his attention. He sits motionless, watching her with a pleading gaze, trying to catch her eye so that he might guess her feelings. The young man tries to feel her soul with his invisible antennae, but the angry woman must attempt to withstand his attempts at communication.

## EXERCISE 6.10

## COMMUNION

The great acting teacher Sanford Meisner believed the loss of communion onstage to be the biggest problem facing actors. Without this spiritual bond, the scene loses its power and has no chance to connect with the audience. According to Meisner, two actors could theoretically create three-dimensional characters, play the proper actions, discover true emotions, and still fail in the performance. The energy and tension in a scene come as a result of the interaction between characters. Drawing upon Stanislavski's idea of communion and Meisner's famed beginning acting classes at the Neighborhood Playhouse, perform the following sequence of exercises.

- A. With the entire class, *really* look at one another. Don't pretend to look, but really observe each other. Look at one person's hair, another person's shoes, and yet another person's unsightly blemish. What do you notice? Say what you observe aloud to yourself. Don't worry about "being nice" because there is no place for "nice" onstage. Say what you really notice about the observable physical attributes of the people around you.
- B. Now stand opposite one of your classmates. Decide who is Partner A and who is Partner B. A turns toward B and says aloud one physical observation about B. For example, A might say, "curly hair." B listens carefully and repeats back what he has heard. Then A repeats back what she has heard; B repeats back what he has heard, and so on. Continue this word repetition exercise until the instructor or observer tells you to stop. Repeat back exactly what you hear, not what you think you are supposed to have heard. Don't anticipate. Don't assume your partner will give you what you expect. For example, if your partner omits a word or accidentally inverts the sentence, do not correct that response. Remember, you should repeat back exactly what you hear. On the other hand, there should be no pauses between phrases. There should be no *thinking* about your response. Also, do not try to be interesting, and do not purposefully do anything with the words. Simply listen and repeat. This exercise is extremely important because it forces you to listen to one another. It also places your focus outside yourself and onto the other person. Therefore, self-consciousness, a common disease among actors, has little time to develop.
- C. Now the exercise should evolve into what Meisner called "a truthful point of view." Partner A might say, "You have green eyes." Partner B, who has hazel eyes, may say without pause, "I do *not* have green eyes" or "I have hazel eyes." A says, "You have green eyes" because from her point of view, B's eyes are green. B says, "I do not have green eyes," and so on. Let each partner start this exercise five times leading into repetition. Beware of pausing out of the human need to "be right." Simply respond to what you hear



and see from a truthful point of view and with what you know to be true.

- D. Repeat Exercise C. This time, however, the repetition should evolve into language. For example:

A says, "Your hands are in your lap."

B repeats, "My hands are in my lap."

A says, "Your hands are in your lap."

B repeats, "My hands are in my lap."

A says, "Your hands are in your lap."

B moves his hand to scratch his nose. Now he cannot truthfully say, "My hands are in my lap." Instead it changes to "I scratched my nose."

A then repeats, "You scratched your nose," and so on.

With this change in the repetition comes a remarkable development.

Emotion has made an appearance. Sometime during this exercise, laughter may rise. Tears, rage, and scorn may appear. This simple exercise unleashes all kinds of unexpected energy. Keep in mind, however, that neither actor should take the lead by trying to push the dialogue in a particular direction. The repetition should change only when it must.

- E. Extend Exercise D by beginning with a personal question. A might ask, "Are you embarrassed by your receding hairline?" B will then allow himself to give an honest emotional reaction—either verbal or physical. A will then describe B's observable behavioral response to her question. There is no repetition at this point. There is only A's question and B's truthful reaction, followed by A's description of what she observed.

- F. Now extend Exercise E by allowing it to go into repetition.

A asks, "Are you embarrassed by your receding hairline?"

B reacts by bringing his hand to his head and saying, "I'm not losing my hair!"

A says, "That struck a nerve!"

B responds with "That did not strike a nerve!"

A says, "That struck a nerve!" and so on.

Let your instincts dictate when you must change the repetition.

This change must come only from a change in the behavior of your partner. Do not attempt to be outrageous. Do not try to impress your partner. Again, this exercise is about establishing a communion with your partner. *Really* listen and *really* react from a truthful point of view.<sup>10</sup>

## COMMUNING WITH THE AUDIENCE

At this time, we need to discuss briefly the actor's responsibility to the audience, a matter that we will take up in more detail later. Put simply, you must clearly communicate to the audience everything you do and why you are doing it.

You can make something clear to the audience only if you have made it clear to yourself. Far too many student actors attempt an assignment with vague, general answers to the important "W" questions. As we stated in the

opening chapter of this text, you must also infuse the character with an appropriate dimension, energy, and clarity that can communicate the meaning to an audience of a certain size occupying a certain space. If your actions cannot be seen or heard, you will lose your audience's attention. Many young actors get so involved in their actions that they forget to project them to the audience. Inaudible speech and actions are meaningless. To successfully communicate with an audience, even subtle behavior must be performed at a sufficient energy level, which varies with the size of the proscenium arch. Small actions that may be perfectly clear in front of a camera or to an audience in a small experimental theatre may not communicate to an audience in a large proscenium house. Furthermore, student actors who believe that truth is found only in subtlety have a misconception about the nature of human beings. Human behavior is indeed sometimes subtle and understated; however, it is just as apt to be overenthusiastic and raucous. Large actions do not necessarily translate as false indications. Honest human behavior is sometimes enormous. As long as you behave truthfully in imaginary circumstances, no matter how large your decisions, the audience will believe your actions.



Photo by Kenneth L. Stilson

### FIGURE 6.5

Whitney LaMora (*left*), Brittany Kriger, and Audrey Stanfield in a scene from Southeast Missouri State University's production of *Crimes of the Heart*. Directed by Kenneth L. Stilson; costume design by Rhonda Weller-Stilson; lighting design by Philip Nacy; scenic design by Jeffrey Luetkenhaus. The actors in this scene are communing with each other, while focusing on the birthday candles. A strong connection between actors transcends the proscenium and establishes a communion with the audience.

Incidentally, everything the actor does should also be interesting. Attempting to accomplish this requisite, however, can lead the actor into the trap of producing out-of-place and illogical comedy, novelty, or sensationalism for its own sake, rather than for the sake of illuminating the given circumstances. Shakespeare, in Hamlet's advice to the Players, wrote, "o'erstep not the modesty of nature; for anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing..." He later warned, "for there be of them that will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too, though in the meantime some necessary question of the play be then to be considered." The actor must recognize that human behavior is inherently interesting and is the heart and soul of communion with the audience. Although the world of the play may be extraordinary, even absurd, audiences expect to see truthful behavior. The way to generate interest in your exercises, as well as when performing a role, is to define the world, make the circumstances specific, and provide conflict via an explicit objective that can be realized only by overcoming a definite obstacle. If you plan carefully and concentrate on each step necessary to carry out your plans, you will have a solid foundation for a performance that will interest an audience.

## MAKING AN ACTION OF SPEECH

Both in life and onstage, we use words as a means of getting what we want, as a way of realizing our objectives. We use words to ask, beg, demand, plead, explain, persuade, woo, threaten, and so on. Full consideration of the particular problems of interpreting lines will be discussed in Part II of this text, but at this point in your training, you need to understand how to incorporate speech in the overall task of performing. A mere reading of the lines, no matter how intelligent or how beautiful, is only a part of your responsibility. No matter how glibly and mellifluously delivered, all dialogue will appear superfluous, unless it is demanded by the action of the play.

Onstage conflict generates dramatic action. Conflict, however, does not necessarily mean open hostility. In life, conflict takes many forms. We smile. We look away. We lie. We talk in hushed tones. Conflict may be camouflaged to the point that others may not be able to detect its presence. We may be in the midst of a heated private debate, yet someone on the outside may perceive our conversation as pleasant and serene. According to Irina and Igor Levin, Stanislavski said that "Immobility of the one sitting on the stage does not define one's passivity.... One may be motionless, but, nevertheless, be in genuine action. Often physical immobility is the direct result of an intense action." This expands our definition of stage action to mean something more than movement and physical activity.<sup>11</sup>

Speech is a variant of action. "The artist on the stage must be able to act not only with his hands and feet but also with his tongue; that is, with words, speech, intonation," wrote Stanislavski. "The word and speech must also act; that is, they must force the other person to understand, see, and think just like the speaker does." Later, Stanislavski points out directly that "the



transmission of one's thought is the same as action," and he ceases to distinguish between "physical" and "verbal" action.<sup>12</sup>

The basic function of stage speech is to help you accomplish your character's goals. You must know the purpose of every word, and you must know how each utterance relates to that purpose. You must have this relationship clearly in mind for every moment of the play, both during rehearsal and in performance. Acting is not only believing, it is also thinking! Concentrating on speaking smoothly or beautifully will interfere with thinking about the action of the play. You must discover a genuine need to use the playwright's words and train yourself to keep your character's thoughts alive as you speak them. You must particularly guard against the abandonment of live thinking during repetitious rehearsals.

In some primitive languages, the word for acting and speaking is the same. "Your" words are important tools for engaging in communion with others onstage. Simply saying "good morning" has no justification unless you say these words to influence another character in some way or other. The greeting may "infect" the listener with casual indifference, deep love, or intense hate. It may say any one of a dozen things, each intended to evoke a different response.

Communion, however, is two-way influence. You must concentrate not only on *affecting* others but also on *listening* to what is said, resisting or yielding to the desires of the speaker. A special ability to listen is often mentioned as one of the specific skills required of an actor. You must listen and respond to everything said at each rehearsal and performance as if it had never been heard before—Gillette's "illusion of the first time." This illusion is necessary for both you and the audience, no matter how long you have worked on a part—no matter how often you have rehearsed or performed it. For a talented and trained actor, each performance is a new and fresh series of transactions, leading to an appropriate communion between actors and audience.

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## EXERCISE 6.11

## SPEAKING EVERY LINE WITH PURPOSE

Every line of text in every play must have purpose that will move the dramatic action forward. An actor must produce imaginative physical actions to support each line, and she must concentrate her attention on influencing the behavior of her partner to complete the communion demanded by the scene. Even though each actor will have a single, simple objective for every complete unit of action, she must state the purpose of each line in her own words.

- A. In this exercise, two female actors should engage in the following dialogue from David Auburn's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Proof*. The actual text is in the left column. In the adjacent column, we have defined a purpose for that line.



*Proof* is a play about a 25-year-old woman (Catherine) who had been taking care of her brilliant mathematician-father for several years until his death, which came after a long bout with mental illness. Now, at the time of his funeral, she must deal with her own volatile emotions; the arrival of her estranged older sister, Claire; and the attentions of Hal, a former student of her father's who hopes to find valuable work in the many notebooks that her father left behind. In the play, Auburn asks the question whether mental illness, as well as mathematical genius, can be passed down from one generation to the next.

This sequence of dialogue takes place the morning after a late-night party in honor of their father. Claire has just suggested to her sister Catherine that she would like her "to move to New York." The simple objective of each character is clear. Claire must convince her younger sister to move to New York with her and her husband so that they may help her regain her mental health and establish a new life. Catherine, on the other hand, must defend her right to stay in their father's house and live her own life.

**Text****Purpose**

**Catherine:** I live here.

**Catherine:** I must avoid talking about this.

**Claire:** You could do whatever you want.  
You could work, you could go to school.

**Claire:** I must demonstrate the possibilities.

**Catherine:** I don't know, Claire. This is pretty major.

**Catherine:** I want time to think.

**Claire:** I realize that.

**Claire:** I must show my compassion.

**Catherine:** I know you mean well. I'm just not sure what I want to do. I mean to be honest, you were right yesterday. I do feel a little confused. I'm tired. It's been a pretty weird couple of years. I think I'd like to take some time to figure things out.

**Catherine:** I have to work through this confusion before making any decisions.

**Claire:** You could do that in New York.

**Claire:** I must make her understand this fact.

**Catherine:** And I could do it here.

**Catherine:** I must take a stand.

**Claire:** But it would be much easier for me to get you set up in an apartment in New York, and—

**Claire:** I must convince her that this will be better for *everyone*.

**Catherine:** I don't need an apartment, I'll stay in the house.

**Catherine:** I must defend my decision to stay here while I think.

**Claire:** We're selling the house. (Beat.)

**Claire:** I must force her to see there are no alternatives.

**Catherine:** What?

**Catherine:** I want her to say it again.

- Claire:** We—I'm selling it.
- Catherine:** When?
- Claire:** I'm hoping to do the paperwork this week. I know it seems sudden.
- Catherine:** No one was here looking at the place, who are you selling it to?
- Claire:** The university. They've wanted the block for years.
- Catherine:** I live here.
- Claire:** Honey, now that Dad's gone it doesn't make sense. It's in bad shape. It costs a fortune to heat. It's time to let it go. Mitch agrees, it's a very smart move. We're lucky, we have a great offer—
- Catherine:** Where am I supposed to live?
- Claire:** Come to New York.
- Catherine:** I can't believe this.<sup>13</sup>
- Claire:** I want her to know this is *my* decision.
- Catherine:** I must know how much time.
- Claire:** I wish to appeal to her sense of reason.
- Catherine:** I must make her prove her lie.
- Claire:** I must show her this is a "done deal."
- Catherine:** I must defend my rights.
- Claire:** I must convince her this is the right thing to do.
- Catherine:** I want to appeal to her sympathy.
- Claire:** I must convince her to come now.
- Catherine:** I must show her that I am disgusted by her idea.

Of course, in developing a role completely, you may be certain of the action of each line only after you understand the desires that motivate all of your character's behavior. We will also engage in understanding your character's objective more fully in Part II, which considers the actor in relation to the play. At this time, you should continue to work on small scenes without assuming the responsibility of finding their total meaning in relationship to the rest of the play.

- B. This time, do the same exercise as illustrated in Exercise A with any appropriate sequence of dialogue from the play of your choice.

## EXERCISE 6.12

## KEY LINE IMPROVISATION

Working with one partner, select one of the following scenarios as the basis for an improvisation. When preparing a role for scene study, it is absolutely necessary to read and thoroughly analyze the entire script. (This will be discussed in depth in Part II of this book.) For this improvisational exercise, however, we do not expect that you will be familiar with the play. Although you are not creating a score of physical actions, you will need a few minutes of preparation. Before you begin the improvisation, you and your partner must create the given circumstances—the who, what, when, where, and why. The "how" will be determined as you present the improvisation. Use your imagination, and

don't worry about making wrong decisions with regard to the play as a whole. This is an improvisation from an unfamiliar script. You are only beholden to the generalized scenario and the specific key lines. After you have established your relationship and the circumstances, focus on playing your objective. You do not know what offensive actions your partner will attempt or what defenses he will use against your attacks. Therefore, it is up to you to infect your partner and adapt to the changing circumstances. This give-and-take is the essence of a lively stage performance.

- A. In Anna Li's *Compatible*, Man, dressed in his finest clothing, stands behind Woman, also beautifully dressed, holding her jaw, while feeding her champagne in a kiss. Their key lines are:

**Woman:** I love you.

**Man:** What? You what?

- B. In *V-E Day*, by Faye Sholiton, eighteen-year-old Evie dreams of a career as a photojournalist. She and her best friend, Lil, are working on their next newsletter for the troops in her living room during World War II. Lil believes Evie is in love with her brother, who is stationed overseas, and feels Evie has a patriotic duty to settle down with him upon his return. Their key lines are:

**Evie:** The new *Life*. Look at those photographs!

**Lil:** They're good.

**Evie:** Read the credits.

**Lil:** "Margaret Bourke White."

**Evie:** Yeah. A woman, like you and me! From here!

- C. Neil LaBute's *Reasons to Be Pretty*, centers on the story of Greg, a working class man whose life is thrown into disarray when he makes an offhand comment about his girlfriend. It is a scathing examination of America's obsession with physical beauty. In this scene, Greg tries to comfort Steph, but she immediately pulls away. Their key lines are:

**Steph:** STOP. Why would you ... ? God. Idiot.

**Greg:** I'm trying to comfort you ...

- D. In Leigh Kennicott's *Scenes from an Unfinished Life*, Effie, the older teenage sister who has suffered sexual abuse, ransacks her own room looking for something. Florrie, her younger sister whose whole life is a reaction to that abuse, enters and stops Effie's assault on her drawers and closets. Their key lines are:

**Florrie:** You won't get it back this way, Effie. Please.

**Effie:** But I can. I will.

**Florrie:** Effie, it's awful what happened, but can't you just—put it away for good? Jesus will forgive you. It wasn't your fault.

**Effie:** Jesus! Where was he?  
(SHE sings.)  
"Jesus loves the little children,  
All the children of the world...."

**Florrie:** Maybe it's just—we're not children anymore.

- E. In *Burning the Old Man*, by Kelly McAllister, Bobby and Marty, two brothers, are traveling to the Burning Man Festival, an annual desert gathering based on radical self-expression, to bury their father's ashes, as he wished. On the way, Bobby smoked a joint in the backseat and set their mother's car on fire. The night before the festival, in the lobby of a run-down motel in the middle of the Nevada desert, Marty has just called their mother. Their key lines are:

**Bobby:** (Takes the box of ashes from the table, sits with it on the couch.)  
I can't believe you called Mom. What are you, 12?

**Marty:** You set the car on fire.

**Bobby:** It was an accident. Jesus. I said I'm sorry.

**Marty:** Not even noon, and you're smoking Mary Jane.

**Bobby:** Wake and bake. Don't knock it 'til you try it. And did you just say Mary Jane? Geek.

- F. In *Let It Go*, by Crystal Field, nineteen-year-old Merrilee, whose brother was killed in the Iraq War, and her boyfriend, Patrick, are next to her brother's freshly dug grave. Immediately following the funeral, everyone else has returned to the family's home for lunch. Their key lines are:

**Merrilee:** I'm not goin'.

**Patrick:** Where you goin' then?

**Merrilee:** I'm goin' to New York City.

**Patrick:** New York City!!! Why you goin' there?

**Merrilee:** Because.

**Patrick:** Why because?

**Merrilee:** Because my brother said someday we'd go.

- G. In *Feed the Hole*, by Michael Stock, Shelly and Samantha, friends since they were kids, are in a dress shop trying on outfits and talking about whether or not they are happy with their lives so far. Their key lines are the following:

**Shelly:** Do you like this dress, or no? It's beautiful, but—it's—

**Samantha:** Yeah?



**Shelly:** Definitely, try the other one....

**Samantha:** You have to leave him.

- H. In John Patrick Shanley's *Danny and the Deep Blue Sea*, Danny, an emotionally unstable trucker nicknamed "The Beast," and Roberta, a friendless and divorced single mother, collide in a dive bar, and despite hostile and desperate conditions, begin a powerful and frightening relationship. This scene takes place in Roberta's Bronx bedroom. Their key lines are:

**Roberta:** Let's be romantic with each other! Say things to each other!

**Danny:** No. Like what?

**Roberta:** I don't know. Like ... If you love me, I'll love you, too.

- I. In *Freedom High*, by Adam Kraar, Henry, a 26-year-old African American who works with the Freedom Riders during the Civil Rights movement, and Jessica, an affluent white college student, are in the woods near a college campus. Henry has been training mostly white student volunteers to travel to Mississippi and help African Americans register to vote. While he struggles with doubts about the project, Jessica is concerned about the increased tensions between Henry and the volunteers. In this scene, Henry enters quickly. Out of breath, Jessica runs in behind him. Their key lines are:

**Jessica:** Henry ... wait....

**Henry:** You don't wanna talk to me right now. Dig?

**Jessica:** We weren't laughing at you. We're laughing at the documentary. That pink lady, rambling on about how Negroes don't want to vote?

- J. In *Birdy*, by Naomi Wallace, Young Al and Young Birdy are best buddies. Al calls his friend "Birdy" because of his fascination with birds. In this scene, the teenage boys are in Birdy's bedroom. Young Birdy stands uncomfortably in a rented tuxedo. Their key lines are:

**Young Birdy:** I feel like a freak.

**Young Al:** If you'd stop sweating you'd be fine.

**Young Birdy:** I can't do it, Al. Call Doris. Tell her I broke my leg.

- K. In the scene "Bench Seat" from Neil LaBute's *Autobahn*, a Guy and a Girl are seated inside a parked car. Their key lines are:

**Girl:** ... That's all I wanna know.

**Guy:** What? That I'm ... I'm ...

**Girl:** That you're not just blowing me off here.

**Guy:** I'm ... hey, I'm not. No.

- L. In Jonathan Marc Sherman's *Evolution*, Henry is a twenty-year-old academic type who is clueless about *anything* having to do with popular culture. Ernie, his girlfriend's brother, thinks Henry should forget about intellectual writing and focus more on TV. Intoxicated, Henry and Ernie silently watch television. Their key lines are:

**Henry:** ... I think it's working. (*Beat.*) Who is that?

**Ernie:** Who? The cartoon?

**Henry:** Yeah.

**Ernie:** Shut up.

**Henry:** What?

- M. In *Still Life with Parrot and Monkey*, by Paula Cizmar, Faith is an avid gossip who has a habit of dropping in on Gloria, her daughter, at the worst possible times. Gloria, who hears a strange voice that somehow seem like the spirit of Frida Kahlo, has just found out through the grapevine that her neighbor has reportedly had episodes where she spontaneously burst into flames. In this scene, Gloria is applying makeup at the kitchen table when her mother bursts into the room. Gloria shrieks; Faith gives her the eye. Their key lines are:

**Faith:** Are you okay?

**Gloria:** Well, it's not every day that you hear about someone you know just bursting into flames.

# Investigating the Subconscious

*"Acting technique develops 'a conscious road to the subconscious.'"*

**Constantin Stanislavski**

Everything onstage is a lie. The properties, the makeup, the costumes, the scenic environment, as well as the actor's emotions are not real. In life, we do not think about emotions such as love, hate, or anger as they are happening. Rather, these emotions occur naturally and subconsciously as a result of actual external stimuli. We think about the resulting emotions only later as we reflect on a particular event or circumstance. Onstage, however, every action and every emotion must be controlled and conscious. Characters may be insane, obsessive, uncontrollably violent, or drugged, yet actors must always remain in command of their emotional and physical being. That is one of the actor's paradoxes. Whereas emotions in life occur without thought, stage emotions result from deliberate choices and actions.

Your inner resources consist of everything you have experienced. Every personal event, every movie, every book, every photograph, every time you explore the Web, the experience goes into your memory bank and becomes an important resource from which to draw onstage. Stanislavski called his approach to the use of internal stimuli **affective memory**, which he later divided into *sense memory* and *emotion memory*. This technique was designed to produce controlled emotional reactions that actors could use to color their characters.

True emotions in life—what Stanislavski referred to as **primary emotions**—are extremely difficult to control. Our interpretation of emotions is also imprecise and vague because we never have just one emotion. At any given time, we may be happy, anxious, terrified, nauseous, and determined. But what is happy? What is anxious? Everyone interprets these emotions differently, and these isolated feelings meld together and change with the circumstances. They are almost impossible to define precisely, and yet audiences ultimately judge the quality of an actor's performance by her ability to truthfully convey these emotions.

Stanislavski referred to stage emotions as **repeated emotions**, and they differ greatly from primary emotions. If you love someone onstage, it is not real love, but it is truthful. A character's emotions are as true to the actor as the eternal verities of life, but repeated emotions have a different quality than primary emotions. Stanislavski referred to these repeated emotions as "poetic reflection" of the actor's primary emotions. **Sonia Moore** wrote, "No actor could survive long if he had to go through a true tragic shock every time he performs. And if an actor is honest, he will admit that an authentic emotion of suffering while performing gave him true joy."<sup>1</sup>

Repeated emotions do not arise from actual causes; they occur because actors have experienced similar emotions in their own lives. We each have a lifetime of emotional experiences, and we all have the capacity to do anything within our physical realm. We have all experienced love, hate, jealousy, and greed, just as we have all felt incompetent, boastful, shy, and superior. We have faced every conceivable human emotion many times and under vastly different circumstances. According to scientific research, the nerves that repeatedly participate in the experience of each emotion become highly sensitive and responsive to that emotion. Therefore, through exercises, rehearsals, and performances, actors develop a conditioned reflex in which their emotions are stirred in response to the stage stimulus.

Unlike primary emotions, repeated emotions do not completely absorb us. When tragedy strikes in real life, we are completely immersed at that moment. We do not have the capacity to objectively consider our feelings. Years later, however, as we reflect on the events and as other life encounters penetrate our memories, we have the ability to objectify our experience. This is the actor's emotional state while living through the character's emotions for the "first" time. Actors live in the present—Stanislavski's state of "I am"—but they never completely forget they are in front of an audience. Again, their repeated emotions are absolutely sincere and truthful, but they are not real. There is a distance between these emotions and the actor. You must find your own personal emotions that are analogous to those of the character you are creating. You must remember your behavior and then apply it to the character. "Then," according to Moore, "you will merge with the character, and it will be difficult to know what





Photo by Gerry Goodstein.

### FIGURE 7.1

Laila Robins (*standing*) and Edward James Hyland in a scene from The Shakespeare Festival of New Jersey's production of *King John*. Directed by Paul Mullins; costume design by Lora LaVon; lighting design by Michael Giannitti; scenic design by Anita Stewart. Actors strive for true emotions onstage. The powerful emotions demonstrated by the actors in this photo are not primary; instead, they substitute analogous emotions from their own lives to find truth in the circumstances.

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is yours and what is the character's because you will also be revealing yourself."<sup>2</sup>

Finding appropriate emotional memories is not an end in itself; they lead you to a more complete understanding of your character's desires, morals, fears, and distinct points of view regarding any person or issue in her world. Emotion memories are not complete until they are transferred to your character and made synonymous with their circumstances. Emotion memories help you believe in your given circumstances. They allow you to have faith in your relationships, and they help you to discover your character's behavior by justifying your every action.

## RECALLING SENSE AND EMOTION MEMORY

Most of the time onstage, we spontaneously recall our memories. Facts, figures, faces, stories, images we have known in the past—even sensory and emotional experiences—come back automatically as we need them. If you perform logical actions, believe in the given circumstances, work toward objectives and against obstacles, and establish specific relationships with onstage objects, clothing, environment, and other actors, then your past experiences will likely be subconsciously serving you without thought. Your actions and relationships, coming directly from the imaginary circumstances of the play and from connection with the other actors, should automatically tap into your inner resources and evoke the proper feeling. If, on occasion, the techniques of physical action, objectives, and relationships do not elicit the desired responses, you may need to bring a past personal experience directly to bear on the stage situation.

Although theatre history provides much evidence that actors have always made conscious use of their experiences to some degree as a specific technique, Stanislavski first extensively explored this practice in the early twentieth century. However, his early experiments in emotion memory brought actors to a state of panic that actually affected their nervous systems. Thus, he concluded that the use of emotions as a principal means to discover truth onstage was very dangerous. When Stanislavski later discovered the Method of Physical Actions and made *it* the focal point of his system, he also revolutionized the use of emotion memory. He realized that emotional recall was an indirect process. As a reliable and safe approach to tap our emotional resources, we should focus, Stanislavski decided, on recalling the sensory experiences of the situation, and, most of all, we should remember our actions. With these admonitions in mind, we will discuss emotion memory in three steps. You ordinarily go through these steps without thinking about them, but a separate examination of each will help you when you need to make conscious use of the process.

## RETAINING A PERSONAL MEMORY

“Time is an excellent filter for our remembered feelings,” wrote Stanislavski. “Besides, it is a great artist. It not only purifies, it also transmutes even painfully realistic memories into poetry.”<sup>3</sup> It is important for you to understand that the original experience must have occurred some time ago; some acting theorists insist that emotional memories must have occurred at least three years before their use onstage. Most of us do not have the ability to view recent events objectively. If, for example, you recently experienced the death of a parent, the rejection of a lover, or a false accusation by a close friend, you most likely will not have come to grips with your feelings as you think on these experiences. If you are overcome with emotions as you recall a particular memory, it is virtually impossible to use it onstage. Over time, the memories of important events remain just as clear, but the distance allows you to view them with the necessary objectivity. Childhood incidents, because they frequently remain in the mind with peculiar vividness, are often especially valuable. Regardless of which experience you use, you must have felt it deeply but accepted it emotionally.

Retaining the experience is partly a matter of natural memory and partly a matter of conscious effort. Most people are genuinely aware of what is going on around them and are likely to remember what has happened in the past. Any technique, however, that will aid you in retaining the detail of an experience vividly in your mind is worth developing. Here is what we mean.

A ten-year-old boy from a small town was riding his bicycle to the corner store, followed by his dog, Hilda. The boy's pet was his constant companion. Hilda slept with him at night and followed the boy almost everywhere he went. As they approached an intersection of a moderately busy street, the dog ran in front of a car and was killed. The boy released a painful cry. Unable to bear the sight of his “best friend” lying disfigured and bloody on the road, the boy jumped on his bike and rode as quickly as he could back to his house. Pedaling as fast as he could, the boy shed tears, and liquid dripped unashamedly from his nose. He cried for his mother. As he entered his yard, he jumped off his bicycle and ran through the house calling for his mother. No one was home. Not knowing what to do, the boy jumped back onto his bike and pedaled with much trepidation back to the intersection where his beloved dog was lying. As he approached the sight, he noticed a police car parked close to where the accident had occurred. The boy, with tears still streaming down his face, did not approach the officers. Instead, he simply watched as the police got a shovel from the trunk of the car and casually lifted the carcass into a plastic bag. They then tossed it in the trunk and drove away.

The boy never forgot that traumatic childhood story. As years passed, every detail remained as vivid as if it had occurred only yesterday. His bicycle, his clothing, the neighborhood, the weather, the time of day, and the sight of his dog being killed were fixed in his memory. The pain, however, eventually subsided. He overcame the shock of the moment. Time filtered his

emotions, and he objectively accepted the death of what he perceived as a member of his family. But he never forgot.

## SELECTING THE PERSONAL MEMORY

Good actors accumulate inner resources that may serve them after they can recall the experiences objectively. In deciding what experiences to recall, actors search their past for events that most nearly parallel those of their characters. They may be identical, or they may be far removed.

Remember, most of our sensory and emotional experiences return automatically as we need them onstage. If you believe your character's actions, the circumstances, and "your" relationships, your real memories will subconsciously serve you without thought. Through your selected actions, you will tap into your inner resources, thus evoking true secondary emotions.

The young boy who had witnessed the death of his beloved dog grew into a fine young actor. Early in his career he was cast in the television role of a young man who witnessed the brutal murder of his father. The young actor had little problem with the majority of the scene. Through his character's verbal and physical actions, he produced truthful inner images and emotions. However, as the character described the actual murder of "his" father, the actor could not exploit the emotional depths required by this dramatic moment, especially after more than a dozen takes of the scene. The director saw the character as breaking down in uncontrollable tears in front of the jury, but the actor could not produce the effect. Fortunately for him, the young man had never experienced the death of a family member or close friend, nor witnessed a violent murder. However, he recalled the death of his dog, Hilda, to help him find the truth in this dramatic television scene.

More often than not, you will not be able to find a close approximation to the experience of your character. Obviously, your personal experiences will not parallel those of every character you might be called on to play. Therefore, you must often resort to situations in which your feelings were similar to those of the character, even though the circumstances that prompted the feelings may have been entirely different. The actor playing the young man on the witness stand had no direct parallel to the moment in the play, and he was unable to produce truthful emotions from the circumstances and his selected actions. The young man's actual memory of the death of his dog is emotionally similar to the character's experience of watching the brutal murder of his father. Although the magnitude of the death of a pet does not compare to the brutal slaughter of a parent, to a young boy of ten, there are many parallel emotions.

Another example that would most likely require you to substitute your own emotion memory into that of the character is the potion scene (Act IV, Scene iii) from *Romeo and Juliet*. Secretly married to Romeo, Juliet has been promised by her parents to Count Paris. To get herself out of this entanglement, she is about to take a potion to make her appear dead. She then will be placed in the family tomb, and Romeo will rescue her. Juliet is about to



do something the outcome of which is uncertain and fraught with dreadful possibilities, an action that will surely call for emotions starting with fear and mounting almost to hysteria. During the moments before this horrifying act, she imagines all the things that might happen to cause her plan to fail and is distracted. What if the potion does not work at all? What if it is a poison? What if she should wake before Romeo comes and find herself alone in the tomb with the remains of all her buried ancestors? If you are to play Juliet, you must make these fears personal and believable within the given circumstances.

What experience have you had that might enable you to realize Juliet's fear? Have you been in a situation, no matter how dissimilar in its actual circumstances, which induced a feeling akin to Juliet's? Have you ever been alone, preparing to take some step the uncertain consequences of which held possibilities of danger? Unhappiness? Pain? Discomfort? Did you ever prepare to run away from home? Contemplate an elopement? Did you ever prepare to go to the hospital for an operation? To go into the army? To go away to college? To move to a new town where you might be homesick? Have you ever felt trapped while exploring a cave? Perhaps you could recall an instance of fright from your childhood. Almost everybody has experienced something like this.

For example, perhaps when you were fourteen years old, you spent a weekend with an aunt who lived alone in a large house with no neighbors nearby. On the first evening, before you had become acquainted with your surroundings, your aunt was called to care for a sick friend. You boasted that you were used to staying alone, and because it was impractical to get a sitter on short notice, your aunt reluctantly left you to look after yourself for a couple of hours. You settled down in the living room, feeling grown up and independent, and looked happily at a book. Gradually, you became uneasy. At home, you had activity and noise to calm you, but this place was terribly still. At home, lights all through the house made everything bright and cheerful. Here a lamp with a green shade in the living room and a lamp with a red globe in the hallway cast eerie shadows on unfamiliar surroundings.

Suddenly you were overcome with fear. A noise on the porch started you thinking of thieves and kidnappers. You had no sooner quieted those fears than a noise upstairs started you thinking of ghosts and haunted houses. It seemed impossible to stay in the house alone, but the outdoors was just as terrifying. The cell phone your parents gave you had a weak signal, and to reach the landline telephone you had to go down the hall and into the completely dark dining room.

If such an incident is your liveliest experience with fear, it will have to serve, and if you can recall it vividly, it will serve you well in preparing to play Juliet's potion scene.

## USING THE PERSONAL MEMORY

Concentrate on remembering the details of the experience rather than on the emotion itself. Begin by using sensory recall. In the previous example,

you should attempt to remember as much as you can about the room—the lights with their bright spots and especially the dark corners; the reflection of the light on the dark, polished surfaces of the furniture; the windows, shiny black in the darkness, reflecting the quiet gloom. Remember the chair you sat on, the objects on the table beside the chair, and the pictures you looked at. Recall the odors of the room—lilacs and furniture polish. Recall the stillness and the sounds you heard (or thought you heard).

When returning to such a situation as a source for your performance of the potion scene, you need to develop a shortcut to the heart of the memory. By breaking the memory down into its individual components, you can usually re-create the sensation of the moment by concentrating on the aspect that provides you with the most vivid connection to the situation. You should



Photo courtesy of Florida State University School of Theatre. Photo by Jon Nalon

## FIGURE 7.2

Josh Weinstein (*left*) and David Kimple in a scene from Florida State University's production of *Waiting for Godot*. Directed by Joel Waage; costume design by Emma Scholl; lighting design by Jose Santiago; scenic design by Ola Kraszpuska. Although the entire play is set on country road by a tree in a vague, absurdist world, the actors in this scene must still draw from personal memories to make their characterizations three-dimensional.

be able to get to the sensation of fear by concentrating on a specific sound, a particular odor, or the way your body temperature changed, rather than by attempting to evoke the entire experience every time you need to use it. When you can place this odor, this sound, or this body temperature within the given circumstances of the potion scene, your use of emotional memory is complete.

If you are unfamiliar with this technique, you will be surprised (after you give it an honest trial) how many details you will be able to bring back and how much the memory of the way things felt and looked and smelled will help you recapture the essence of the entire experience.

As you are working with the experience during the rehearsal period, try to remember as much detail as possible about what you did in this situation. How did you deal with the cause of your fear—the frightening shadows? The sounds on the porch? The noise upstairs? Perhaps you first pretended you were not afraid. You may have tried to renew your interest in the pictures. Did you brave your way into one of the dark corners for another book? You tried then to reassure yourself by singing as loudly as possible. Gaining a little confidence, you may have gone timidly to the window to investigate the sounds on the porch. What happened physically, when you could not bring yourself to take a good look? Remembering the childhood situation at the level of physical action should give you a range of believable choices for performing Juliet's scene. Adapting them to the given circumstances of the scene you are playing should reinforce your emotional recall.

When you attempt to remember an incident, sit quietly relaxed, free of tensions that might interfere with the flow of memory and feeling. In a sense, this technique is an application to acting of Wordsworth's famous definition of poetry: "Emotion recollected in tranquility."

Whenever incorporating the preceding emotion memory exercise into your rehearsal process, the final step is to make certain that anything you use from your remembered experience is believable within the given circumstances of the scene and your character. Unless you can use the feelings you have induced to help you play the actions and speak the lines of the character, you will take yourself out of the play and away from your objective. You must especially guard against reducing moments conceived by the imagination of a master dramatist to your own personal experiences, which may be drab and smaller in scope. One of the strongest tendencies of a student actor is to "play everything too small." Don't forget that drama, for the most part, explores the greatest—and many times the largest—moments in the lives of its characters.

Unless your director schedules time during rehearsals for such exercises, you should carry on this process during your work on the role at home or during your preparation before rehearsal and performance. The mark of a prepared and competent actor is the ready ability to access responses during rehearsals and performances on demand.

It should be apparent that emotion memory is a technique better suited to study and rehearsal periods than to performance. Used correctly, it sharpens



**EXERCISE 7.1****RECONSTRUCTING A PERSONAL MEMORY**

Remember a specific moment in your life when you strongly felt some emotion such as anger, hate, love, or fear. Reconstruct in your mind the detailed circumstances that caused you to experience this emotion. Create and present a score of physical actions related to these circumstances until you can sense the emotion associating itself with the action. As with all scores, your sequence of actions must have a beginning, middle, and end, and your focus should be on accomplishing a specific goal.

If you have trouble thinking of a strongly felt emotion, you may start with one of the following circumstances.

- the moment you realized (and perhaps confessed) your love of another person
- the time when your boyfriend or girlfriend broke up with you
- your greatest personal accomplishment
- the biggest lie you ever told
- your greatest victory or your most crushing defeat (athletics, academic, artistic, and so on)
- a death or funeral (family member, friend, lover, enemy, or pet)
- your greatest moment of joy (or sadness)
- a time you felt superior or dominant over those around you
- a moment of inferiority
- the birth of a child or pet
- the silliest and most uninhibited moment of your life
- the moment you were falsely accused of doing or saying something
- the time you were vindicated
- receiving the best gift anyone has ever given you
- your greatest act of kindness (family, friend, lover, stranger, or group)
- a time when you intentionally hurt someone (physically or emotionally)
- a significant spiritual moment
- the time you were caught cheating (or stealing)
- a moment in which you felt helpless or out of control
- the scariest or most terrifying moment of your life
- any other personal memory that induced a strongly felt emotion

your inner resources, especially those needed to perform scenes of intense emotion. Many teachers who use this tool in the classroom spend hours with individual students, attempting to stimulate the believable recall of an emotional experience. Others think this technique offers so much potential for self-indulgence and for “playing the emotion” rather than “playing the action” that they have turned away from emotional memory altogether.

If you are serious about becoming an actor, we urge you to spend the time it takes to develop this technique, to make it yours, and to be able to



**EXERCISE 7.2****TRIGGERING PERSONAL MEMORIES THROUGH YOUR SENSES**

Past experiences do not always require your recollection of the darkest or happiest times in your life. You may recall powerful emotions through your sense of taste, smell, touch, sight, or sound. The taste of salmon may trigger a particular memory of getting sick on seafood. The smell of a particular type of perfume may remind you of your mother on your first birthday. The feel of a chenille blanket may take you back to your first sleepover. The sight of orange lilies may transport you to your grandfather's funeral. The sound of a train whistle may remind you of a specific evening when you and your brother were lying in bed awaiting the return of your father. Your senses are a direct path to your imagination and your emotion memory.

- A. Sitting in a circle, members of the class should take turns citing specific personal memories triggered through sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch.
- B. With all students sitting in a circle blindfolded, the instructor brings in various objects with distinctive feels, smells, tastes, or sounds. Students observe through their senses by responding to the objects without identifying them. Share personal memories triggered by your sensory reaction to the objects.

use it on command. If you find that believable, true emotions do not arise just from selecting imaginative objectives and concentrating on the external elements of the physical actions you are performing, you will need a technique such as emotion memory to muster a complete mastery of the role. Another approach to emotional memory that has stood the test of time by many great actors is the use of images.

**VISUALIZING INNER IMAGES**

As human beings, we cannot speak without images. As you recall a place, illustrate an event, or describe a person with whom you had an encounter, images flow through your mind. Think of someone you recently met—perhaps someone you bumped into on campus. Describe her clothing. Her physique. Her age. Was she from an urban area or a small town? Was she from a wealthy or a poor family? Did her body language suggest an air of confidence or was she shy and introverted? As you think of this person, images naturally appear in your head. You cannot block them out because they are a natural function of the human brain. These **inner images** are not literal pictures; instead, they emerge as flashes of thought, pieces of the entire visual representation. To test this theory, try to describe an actual person, place, or event without imagery. It is impossible.

Remember, however, everything onstage is a lie. Your character's words are scripted; they belong to incomplete characters living in a fictitious world.



Photo by Gerry Goodstein.

### FIGURE 7.3

Edmond Genest (*left*), Erin Partin, Laila Robins, and Alison Weller in a scene from The Shakespeare Festival of New Jersey's production of *The Cherry Orchard*. Directed by Bonnie J. Monte; costume design by Maggie Dick; lighting design by Steven Rosen; scenic design by Marion Williams. The strong inner images used by this group of actors bring the story to life and help communicate truthful emotions.

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The world of the play may closely resemble our society, or it may remind you of a nightmare. Theirs may be a world in which characters speak in verse or break into song when the moment arises. Regardless of the propinquity of their reality to our own, you have the task of merging your own life with your character's. From an unfinished character, you must create a three-dimensional human being with a distinctive personal history. Everything about your creation must be unique—the character's desires, fears, goals, morals, and values. Your character must dress, behave, gesture, speak, and carry himself differently from anyone else. His entire tempo-rhythm belongs only to him. Although you are working from scripted dialogue, your character's thoughts, speech, and images must be as truthful and complete as your own.

When inferior actors speak their lines, they rush over the dialogue. They see nothing in their minds. Their words have no thoughts; their images are dead. In life, our images are spontaneous, and we sometimes take them for granted. Onstage, however, everything is conscious, including our imagery. As natural as inner images are in life, so to the beginning actor, the process of communicating truthful images is extraordinarily difficult. But you must learn to clearly visualize your images so that your partners onstage see them as well. Only then will your speech and nonverbal gestures commune with the audience.

The technique of using images, then, begins with pictures of specific circumstances supplied voluntarily by the imagination. These pictures lead in turn to action, to belief, and to feeling. Again, we must recognize that feeling is the end and not the means, that the actor is concerned with *causes*, not with *effects*. The actor is like the interior decorator who wants to create a beautiful room. Decorators are concerned with color and fabric and with line and form because they know they are the means to beauty; if properly controlled, they will produce a beautiful effect. But they also understand that trying merely to create beauty without a specific knowledge of how to use their materials is futile.

In his introduction to *Stanislavsky on the Art of the Stage*, David Magarshack describes the process of using images as an acting technique.

The actor needs ... an uninterrupted series of visual images which have some connection with the given circumstances. He needs, in short, an uninterrupted line not of plain but of illustrated given circumstances. Indeed, at every moment of his presence on the stage ... the actor must be aware of what is taking place outside him on the stage (i.e., the external given circumstances created by the producer, the stage designer, and the other artists) or of what is taking place inside him, in his own imagination, that is, those visual images that illustrate the given circumstances of the life of his part. Out of all these things there is formed, sometimes outside and sometimes inside him, an uninterrupted and endless series of inner and outer visual images, or a kind of film. While his work goes on, the film is unwinding itself endlessly, reflecting on the screen of his inner vision the illustrated given circumstances of his part, among which he lives on the stage.<sup>4</sup>

Most of the time, however, inner images are incomplete. Instead, as we speak, our images explode in our minds and change with the speed of light. Thinking is not based on verbally organized ideas. Whereas the storytelling aspect of writing and speech metaphorically resembles the unraveling of a film, as

Magarshack describes in the previous paragraph, inner images are more akin to a contemporary teen watching television or logging on to the Internet. Many teens have short attention spans, preferring to channel surf or surf the net rather than watching or reading an entire story. Rather than a logical and formalized, internal visual narrative that unfolds, the thought process, like “surfing,” paints a fragmented picture of your responses to external stimuli.

### EXERCISE 7.3

### SEEING IMAGES

- A. These exercises are for developing the habit of seeing definite images from word stimuli. For each of the following concrete words, visualize a detailed and specific picture. See yourself in the picture, and think what you would do if you were there. Let yourself respond. Remember that you can't *make* yourself feel but that you can *let* yourself feel. You can make this exercise more valuable by writing down what you see, or, if you can draw, by making a sketch of it. Describe your picture and your actions to the members of the group, making them see the images as vividly as you do.

party	rally	funeral
beach (or forest)	snow (or	camp
vacation	thunderstorm)	antique
dress	concert	boyfriend (or girlfriend)
initiation	fire	car
(or ritual)	team	sister (or brother)
restaurant	pet	parent (or teacher)
bedroom	celebrity	wedding
home	date	accident (or injury)
graduation	sporting event	

- B. Repeat the same process for the following abstract words. It is important that you learn to realize abstract concepts in meaningful concrete images that can stimulate responses, too.

serenity	love	cruelty
disgrace	fame	elegance
injustice	kindness	wealth
speed	happiness	indifference
desire	grief	jealousy
bigotry	glamour	mercy
embarrassment	poverty	beauty
power	infatuation	worship



## EXERCISE 7.4

## IMAGE IMPROVISATIONS

Opportunities abound in plays to use images. Present a solo improvisational scene using one of the problems described here. Illustrate the images through dialogue. The pictures should be definite, not vague and general. The images should also be from life experience, not from the theatre (i.e., don't use an image of another actor in a similar circumstance). As we explained in Exercise 6.12, Key Line Improvisation, we do not expect you will be familiar with the play. There is no score, but you need to take a moment to consider the given circumstances. Use your imagination. Don't worry about making wrong decisions with regard to the play as a whole. In this exercise, you are only beholden to the generalized scenario. Commit yourself to sharing your images with the group.

- A. In *Foreign Bodies*, by Susan Yankowitz, sixteen-year-old Sarah tells the story of saving a younger girl from drowning in a public pool. Thrashing in deep water, the girl's face had turned red from lack of oxygen. When no one else seemed to notice, including the life-guard, Sarah pulled the girl out of the water. Following a few moments of artificial respiration, a large wad of bubblegum, followed by a gush of water, flew out of the girl's mouth.
- B. In *Elliot, a Soldier's Fugue*, by Quiara Alegria Hudes, Elliot, a young soldier fighting in Fallujah, Iraq, west of Baghdad, sits with his partner on patrol wearing night-vision goggles dreaming about what kinds of cereal and other breakfast foods he plans to eat when he gets home.
- C. In Rinne Groff's *The Ruby Sunrise*, Ruby, a teenage runaway, is something of a technological genius. The time is in the early 1930s. Ruby is staying with her aunt on a farm and is working on a project that will someday be known as television. While conducting experiments with her contraption in the barn, she determinedly tells Henry, a boarder with her aunt, about her new invention.
- D. In *Our Lady of 121st Street*, by Stephen Adly Guirgis, Rooftop, a popular Los Angeles DJ, has returned to New York City for the funeral of a nun who was a much-beloved teacher at his Catholic school. The body of Sister Rose has curiously disappeared from the funeral home. Rooftop, while waiting with others for the police to solve the mystery of the missing body, decides to confess his many indiscretions to a priest at a nearby church.
- E. In *The Story*, by Tracey Scott Wilson, Latisha, a young African-American woman with inside knowledge of girl-gangs, recently told Yvonne, an ambitious newspaper reporter, that one of the groups was responsible for the murder of a white man in a black neighborhood. Here, Latisha reveals it's all been a lie.

- F. In *American Tet*, by Lydia Stryk, twenty-year-old Amy lives at home and is putting herself through college by working on the local military base. It is spring 2004, the one-year anniversary of the Iraq War. Affected deeply by the conflict, Amy brings home stories of unhappiness on base from other military family members. In this scene, Amy tells her mother, a career military wife, about co-workers affected by the war, as a way to confide her own feelings.
- G. In *Biloxi Blues*, by Neil Simon, a young soldier named Epstein has filched the notebook in which Eugene has been writing descriptions of all his army comrades. He opens it and reads the section about himself, discovering that Eugene believes Epstein is a homosexual. (Note: Regardless of the situation in the play, actors may improvise this scene as if they are alone as they read or as if they are reading aloud to the entire barracks. They may also assume the given circumstance that Eugene's notion is either true or false.)
- H. In *A Delicate Balance*, by Edward Albee, Tobias recalls an instance several years in the past when a pet cat bit him; afterward, he took it to the veterinarian and had it killed.
- I. In *Boys' Life*, by Howard Korder, Phil tells the story of a girl for whom he would have "sliced his wrists" or "eaten garbage" but who recently dumped him for being "too needy."
- J. In *Lu Ann Hampton Laverty Oberlander*, by Preston Jones, the teenaged Lu Ann sees a picture on the classroom wall of a European castle with a tiny door at its very top. The castle stimulates her to dream about getting out of the small, stifling, Texas town in which she lives.
- K. In Edmund De Santis' *The Language of Kisses*, Mara, the high-strung, estranged daughter of Zan, a well-kept retired college instructor, returns home after a three-year absence. When Zan is not overly enthusiastic about the idea of her jobless daughter moving back into her house, Mara describes how a man who has been stalking her attacked her in an elevator. She refuses to beg, but she desperately needs a "place to crash."
- L. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, by Lorraine Hansberry, Ruth, a young black woman, is preparing with her husband's family to move from crowded quarters into a large house in a white neighborhood. She anticipates the greater comfort their new home will provide as she packs bric-a-brac, accumulated over the years, into a carton. The objects provoke images from the past, and her anticipation evokes images of the future.
- M. In *Suburbia*, by Eric Bogosian, Sooze tells the story of her brother with Down's syndrome, who died by falling into an icy stream while looking for "the doughnut lady" ten years before. As she recalls the event, she visualizes the condition of Mikey's body when they pulled him from the water later that spring.

## PLANNING YOUR INNER MONOLOGUES

In the previous exercises, you have been “surfing” your mind for visual images and describing them vividly to the group. In the process, you have unwittingly used another helpful technique called the **inner monologue**. The inner monologue is a key aspect of the interpretive art of acting, as it is essential for transforming thought into speech. Stanislavski said that actors who do not use them onstage look like “prematurely born people.” Like inner images, inner monologues occur naturally in life while we are listening and thinking. Even in moments of silence, we continue to debate and influence others in our minds and with our body language.

For that reason, the word **pause** is an improper term for actors. Pause indicates a momentary suspension in the action where nothing happens. The word **silence** is more appropriate because our stream of consciousness, our thought processes, and our attempt to infect others never stop.

In reality, inner monologues, like inner images, occur with lightning speed and lack logical organization. Consequently, modern playwrights rarely compose inner monologues. The most common examples in which the classical dramatist creates inner monologues are soliloquies and asides that supply thoughts to be spoken to the audience. Hamlet’s “To be, or not to be . . .” and Macbeth’s “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow . . .” are examples of superb inner monologues. One of the greatest modern dramatists, Eugene O’Neill, experimented with the inner monologue in *Strange Interlude*, in which he wrote “thoughts” for the actors to speak between the lines of regular dialogue. Sonia Moore tells a story in which Nemirovich-Danchenko points out how, in literature, good novelists frequently introduce us to the innermost thoughts of the characters—the thoughts that bring them to their decisions and actions. Mrs. Knebel mentions one of Chekhov’s stories, “He Quarreled with His Wife,” which consists almost entirely of the thoughts that go through a man’s head after he has complained to his wife that the supper was not good. At almost the end of the story, the husband speaks for the first time since his complaint. He says to his wife, “Stop crying, my little darling.” This story shows what a great deal in inner monologue can lie behind one spoken sentence.<sup>5</sup>

Accomplished actors carefully plan their inner monologues, write them out, memorize them, and recall them at each rehearsal and performance, just as faithfully as they memorize and speak the playwright’s lines. If you fail to write down your inner monologues, your thoughts will always be accidental. Thus, your work, which should be done through conscious and deliberate means, will always be unplanned and out of your control. Always keep in mind, however, that what you write down does not necessarily have to appear in complete sentences. Therefore, your inner monologues may be simple phrases and fragments of thought. During rehearsals and performances, repeat in your mind your inner monologues through every silence. Only then will *pauses* disappear.

On the other hand, you must not have an inner monologue as you speak. You know why you are speaking, why you have selected these words. You project the meaning of the words, communicate the subtext, and see the inner



Photo courtesy of Western Illinois University Visual Production Center. Photo by Larr Dean



#### FIGURE 7.4

A scene from Western Illinois University's production of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*. Your inner monologues must be planned, conscious, and deliberate; otherwise, your onstage thoughts will be accidental and out of control.

images. Inner monologues occur only during silences in your own lines, as others speak onstage.

In telling the group the images you had in your mind in the previous exercises, you were, in a sense, speaking a formalized inner monologue using complete sentences. You were making the inner monologue an *outer* monologue and thus receiving an initiation into this useful technique. The next exercise allows you to make further application of the inner monologue using mostly fragmented thought, as it is in life.



**EXERCISE 7.5****SPEAKING YOUR INNER MONOLOGUE**

Create a score of physical actions, and present a solo scene centering on an activity you do not want anyone to know about, for example, opening someone's mail or searching someone's desk. For the purpose of practice, speak your inner monologue, which may be simple phrases and fragments of thought, as you are carrying out your score. You should make use of images and justify your actions. Be sure you have a strong objective and work against an obstacle.

Part I has offered you a basis for developing your own method of acting. It assumes that you establish, from the very beginning, a regimen of physical exercise and vocal study that will place these two tools totally and flexibly at your command. It has concentrated on developing your inner resources so you will be able to create a believable character to communicate with your body and your voice. Your inner technique consists of three stages: (1) discovering the physical actions required to perform the role; (2) creating objectives to go with each physical action that are believable and stimulating to the imagination; and (3) learning to respond to both external and internal stimuli provided by the given circumstances of the play. Along the way, we have also helped you discover an approach to the creative state, to direct your attention to the proper focus of the moment, and to learn to see things in the special, imaginative way an actor views the world. In Part II, you will learn how to mine the play for the raw materials of the role.

## Creating a Character

*"I do not write characters. I write human beings."*

**Henrik Ibsen**

Long before Aristotle's *Poetics*, actors were creating characters. Directors frequently talk about character choices and ask questions about character motivations. Stanislavski's second book is entitled *Building a Character*. As actors, we do indeed create characters. Ibsen's quote is not intended to contradict the title of this chapter or Stanislavski's book. Rather, it serves as a reminder to think from the perspective of your new human being. To consider your onstage self as a character is to think in third person. This approach distances you from your creation. By playing a character, you will undoubtedly pass judgment on any of her choices with which you disagree. You will never see the world through her eyes. You will never wear her clothing. You will never walk in her shoes. Onstage, actors think in first person. What do "I" want? What is standing in "my" way? What am "I" willing to do to get what "I" want? For purposes of teaching and discussion, *character* will remain in our vocabulary, for that is what you are creating. As an actor onstage, however, you must never think like one.

Throughout Part I of this text, we concentrated on technique training that teaches you to use your intelligence, your life experience, your imagination, and your senses as raw material for creating a character. We frequently referred to the dramatist's given circumstances but clearly placed the initial emphasis on the actor. Some of the exercises are derived from published plays, but we attempted to include enough of the circumstances to provide practice in developing logical and appropriate behavior within specific



Photo by Kenneth L. Stilson

### FIGURE 8.1

A scene from Southeast Missouri State University's production of *Biloxi Blues*. Directed by Robert W. Dillon, Jr.; costume design by Deana Luetkenhaus; lighting design by Philip Nancy; scenic design by Jeffrey Luetkenhaus. To create truthful human beings living in imaginary circumstances, this group of contemporary actors must transform themselves and see through the eyes of these World War II army recruits.

parameters. However, to fully create a three-dimensional person who behaves logically within a new world, you must learn how to read, uncover, and use the total circumstances of a script. You must think of yourself as a detective searching for clues found on every page of the text. You must rake the script with a “fine-toothed comb” as you sift through the evidence. Ibsen also wrote, “Read my plays very carefully.” A would-be actor who lacks the appropriate skills (or is perhaps too lazy) to analyze the play will succeed only in creating a characterization that is both incomplete and inconsistent.

Given circumstances refer to everything the writer tells you in the script about your human being and the situation she finds herself in. They are the facts, the details for which there is no discussion. They are your foundation for building a character. Actors who refuse to analyze and accept the given circumstances can literally destroy a scene—and perhaps even the entire play. Of course, your job is to interpret the script—your physical and vocal choices, your character’s rhythm and tempo, the depth of emotions, all the subjective decisions—but you cannot forgo the given circumstances. Some

naïve students actually believe that intense scrutiny of the script will stifle their creativity. This is nonsense. The given circumstances are your ticket to onstage freedom. Really knowing and understanding them gives you infinitely more choices as an actor because they provide you with a distinct point of view concerning every person, object, idea, and event that occurs around “you.”

## DOING YOUR HOMEWORK

It is absolutely crucial for you to read the play—the whole play. Then read it again. And then read it again. At first, simply read it as an audience. Allow yourself to respond to the experience. Take notes. How does it affect you? Then, start to personalize it. Use your imagination. How can you bring this character to life? Incorporate the “magic if.” What would I do *if* I were this character in these circumstances? Create a life for your character. Write down the facts—“your” personal history. Start to think in the first person through the eyes of your character. Decide between the subjective comments of others and the irrefutable truth. Write down your character’s images. Work on “your” simple objectives, “your” physical and psychological obstacles, and “your” perspective about everything and everyone around “you.”

This is your *homework*. You may not like the word, but as a future professional, it is your responsibility to thoroughly study the script. Analysis is *not* just busywork—a classroom exercise that you can forget after you graduate and step into the “real” world. In fact, your homework becomes even more important in the post-graduate environment, particularly in film and television, where you may not have the luxury of months (or even weeks) of rehearsals. As a professional actor, many of your most important discoveries and decisions must be made before you ever meet the rest of the cast or set foot on the stage or set.

After your homework is properly stored in your memory, it should become invisible. The given circumstances affect every decision you make in rehearsals and performances, but they remain rooted in your subconscious. In the analysis phase, you are making conscious decisions about every aspect of your character. In rehearsals, however, you simply know who “you” are. This leaves you free to explore objectives, to work against obstacles, and to make tactical decisions through the eyes of your character.

Stage productions that contain living, vital characters result from a melding of the creative talents of the actor and the dramatist. Any argument over which of the two is more important is fruitless because they are completely interdependent. The actor relies on the character created by the dramatist to provide an essential, continuing stimulus and source of inspiration. On the other hand, without the actor to bring it to life, the dramatist’s character will remain dormant on the pages of the script. The final creation is the result of a true collaboration—a marriage of sorts—between



actor and dramatist. For instance, the audience will see neither Strindberg's Miss Julie nor the actress's Miss Julie, but the actress *as* Strindberg's Miss Julie. Each character a playwright conceives has the potential to sustain a broad range of actions, and for a great character such as Hamlet, that number is practically unlimited. The character's final shape in a particular production will be colored both by the actions selected by the actor and by what the actor finds significant about his personal relationship to the part.

An actor's performance of a character consists of both an inner characterization and its outer form. To create the outer form—the way the character looks, moves, gestures, and speaks—the actor draws “from his own experience of life or that of his friends, from pictures, engravings, drawings, books, stories, novels, or from some simple incident—it makes no difference.”<sup>1</sup> For you to perform a believable, three-dimensional characterization, you must also create the character's inner life. You accomplish this portion of your task by adopting the character's thoughts, emotions, and states of mind, drawing wherever possible on similar experiences in your own life. When you are working correctly, you make a direct connection between the character's external anatomy and your newly created inner being—the psychophysical union. That is your goal, and you must dedicate your study of the play and the role, as well as the designated period of rehearsals, to achieving it.

As we stated in Chapter 1, you can create another person only by drawing on your own experiences, actual or vicarious. No matter how you may alter your outward appearance, no matter how you may change the sound of your voice (and this outer form is necessary to complete characterization), your ability to communicate the essential truth of your role depends upon your capacity to externalize your inner resources. Even though study and observation in the preparation of a specific part may greatly expand your own natural resources, what is essentially *you* remains the same from one character to another. Remember, however, *you* are infinite. Your soul has no bottom. Your imagination and personal history grant an unlimited source for diverse portrayals.

Thus, the actor's final product is a unique creation that cannot be duplicated. No two actors relate in the same way to the same part because they have not had identical experiences in life. “Every artistic stage character is a unique individual creation, like everything else in nature,” writes Stanislavski scholar David Magarshack, continuing:

In the process of its creation there is a “he,” that is “the husband,” namely the author of the play, and a “she,” that is “the wife,” namely the actor or actress. There is “the child”—the created part. There are in this process, besides, the moments of the first acquaintance between “him” and “her,” their first friendship, their falling in love, their quarrels and differences, their reconciliations, and their union.<sup>2</sup>

To say that actors become creative artists in their own right in this process neither minimizes nor falsifies the creativity of the dramatist. Kenneth Brannagh's Hamlet was different from Mel Gibson's Hamlet because each

actor found meaning in Shakespeare's Hamlet in light of his own experience. In so doing, each was true to Shakespeare and to himself.

## PENETRATING THE SCRIPT

While creating a characterization that is unique and personal, you must realize and readily accept the great responsibility you owe to the dramatist. Your first step toward fulfilling that obligation is to study the play until you have gleaned all evidence that discloses the dramatist's overall purpose for the character. Jerzy Grotowski explained that actors must "penetrate" their roles. By definition, *penetrate* means to "enter by overcoming resistance," so Grotowski is admonishing the actors to explore and yield to the physical and psychological demands of the part as they prepare to play it. Some teachers have suggested that actors "have an affair with the script," that they read it as if it were a sensual, "juicy" story. Thus, you must open your senses to the character, reading the script over and over, each time for a different purpose.

As you read the script, two basic questions guide your study:

1. What, overall, does the character want?
2. What is he willing to do to get it?

One man, for instance, may want more than anything else to be rich and may be willing to employ any means to satisfy his desire. He may be willing to forgo all ordinary pleasures, even to sacrifice his health and the happiness of his family. He might break any law—legal or moral—that he finds to be an obstacle. Another man may also want to be rich but might not be willing to obtain his wealth by gambling with the happiness and security of his family or by taking advantage of friends and associates. One woman may want to find love and might be willing to sacrifice everything, even her pride and virtue, to gain what she wants. On the other hand, another with the same basic desire might be too proud to compromise her reputation. Still another might be too shy to let her desire be known.

If you know what "you" want and what "you" are willing to do to achieve "your" goal, you have the key to creating an honest performance. Answering these two questions provides you with the motivating force behind what your character does and says; thus, this task completely dominates your initial study of the play. Failure to understand the overall desire that motivates your character's behavior means a breakdown in understanding the dramatist's intention. This, in turn, means failure to interpret the play truthfully.

Studying a script is a process of analysis and synthesis, of taking apart and putting together. Actors analyze, or take apart, the characters, studying their behavior in relation to the other characters and to the play as a whole. Then, guided by their sensitivity and imagination, they reassemble the parts, organizing them to form an artistic creation.

## IDENTIFYING THE MOTIVATING FORCE

In Chapter 3, we discussed the term *simple objective*, a character's quest at any given moment expressed and pursued by use of an action verb that motivates a sequence of simple actions. The **motivating force**, on the other hand, is what your character wants overall.\* As with the simple objective, you should state the motivating force in specific terms. Finding a name for this overall objective is an important step in creating a character. The name must designate a desire true to the dramatist's overall intention, and, like the simple objective, it must also stimulate the actor to action. A motivating force that does not suggest action is worthless.

Stanislavski emphasized the importance of choosing the right name, recalling his analysis of the hero in Goldoni's *The Mistress of the Inn*. "We made the mistake of using 'I wish to be a misogynist,' and we found that the play refused to yield either humour or action," he wrote. "It was only when I discovered that the hero really loved women and wished only to be accounted a misogynist that I changed to 'I wish to do my courting on the sly' and immediately the play came to life."<sup>3</sup>

Besides not being in accord with the dramatist's conception, "I wish to be a misogynist" was a weak choice because it was insufficiently specific. "I want to hate women" defines a general attitude but fails to suggest action. Such statements as "I want to avoid women" or "I want to take advantage of every opportunity to embarrass women" would have been better. For this character, however, they would still have been unacceptable because he did not hate women at all. And what splendid possibilities for action are suggested by "I want to do my courting on the sly."

You must state your motivating force as a *specific statement that your character can attempt to satisfy through action*. The following are examples of unsatisfactory statements that cannot motivate specific action:

- I want to be unhappy.
- I want to be popular.

Examples of better statements include the following:

- For his indiscretions with my wife, *I want to ruin* my neighbor's reputation in the community.
- *I wish to make others laugh to divert attention* away from my own illness.
- *To exact revenge* upon my boss, *I must expose* his illegal activity.

The convention for naming the motivating force is the same as those for stating simple objectives. Begin the statement with "I want to," "I wish to," or "I must," and follow with an active verb expressing the overall desire of the

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\* Some actors refer to the character's motivating force as the super-objective. We refer to it as motivating force simply to distinguish the character's overall desire from the super-objective of the entire play, which is explored later in this chapter.



Photo by Gerry Goodstein

### FIGURE 8.2

Laila Robins (*Lady Macbeth*) in The Shakespeare Festival of New Jersey's production of *Macbeth*. Directed by Bonnie J. Monte; costume design by Frank Champa; lighting design by Brenda Gray; scenic design by Michael Schweikardt. Lady Macbeth's motivating force stems from her relentless thirst for power.

character. Do not follow with the verb *to be* or a verb expressing feeling, because *being* and *feeling* are conditions, not actions, and consequently cannot be acted.

Your defined motivating force must also involve activity with the other characters. As we recognized earlier, a play is a conflict. Your motivating



force must demand something of the other characters and bring you in conflict with them. And it is through conflict in motivating forces that the plot unfolds and characters are revealed.

Last, the character's motivating force must mean something personal to your character. It must arouse in "you" a real desire to accomplish "your" aims. To *think* is not enough; your character must truly *want*. Stanislavski's student, **Michael Chekhov**, who later became head of the Second Moscow Art Theatre, explained that the actors must be "possessed" of their objective.<sup>4</sup> The motivating force is an emotional magnet that pulls "you" forward. It is not analytical; rather, it must be something for which you yearn.

## CONSTRUCTING "YOUR" AUTOBIOGRAPHY

**Analysis**, for the most part, is a solitary task. It begins with your first reading of the script and doesn't stop until the lights fade on the final performance. You must read, evaluate, analyze, and research everything that helps illuminate your character and her world. Using the script as your primary source, you must reflect on the character's personal history, present state of being, relationships, and self-perceptions. You must consider previous and present actions and the character's future expectations. Research may include pictures, paintings, music, poetry, textures, colors, books, articles, interviews, observations, or anything that may help you in the creative process. Whether writing on your computer or scribbling in a notebook as you lie in bed, you must write down all the information revealed in your script and from your research. You must fill the pages with information and **discoveries** about your character.

From the moment you have been cast in a role, you should consider everything from your character's point of view—"I" rather than he, she, or they. Remember, "you" are unique. "You" have "your" own history, ideas, attitudes, desires, and fears. "You" have a singular attitude regarding every social and moral issue "you" face. As you begin to take notes, don't necessarily worry about spelling and grammar. Write as your character would write—taking into consideration his level of education and mental capacity. If your character is not politically correct, do not attempt to write your autobiography using this twenty-first century convention. You must be as completely subjective and biased as your character would be with regard to everything in this invented world. Also keep in mind that although you may disagree with your character about his spiritual and moral views, choices, and significant life decisions, you must never judge your character. Otherwise, you (the actor) will never be able to sustain belief in "your" (the character's) actions. Writing your analysis in the first person will help you eliminate the tendency to judge your character.

Your analysis is for the most part personal and private. The majority of it should be kept from your fellow actors, and much of the time, you should refrain from discussing "your" most private thoughts with your director. This does not mean to abstain from openly talking about the given circumstances and many of the issues facing your character. Anything "you"

would publicly accept, defend, or share with “your” family, friends, colleagues, and the general public is perfectly acceptable for discussion with your director and colleagues. However, you should avoid sharing “your” *private* thoughts and feelings, “your” secrets. This part of your analysis is solely for your eyes. Put it under lock and key as you would a personal diary. In life, mystery surrounds the most interesting people. We never *really* know even our closest friends (and sometimes we don’t understand our own actions). We may think we know our parents, our siblings, our friends, our lover, but they will always contradict themselves. They do the opposite of what we expect. They relentlessly do things that are “out of character.” Sometimes they harbor thoughts and feelings that stay hidden for years. Sometimes these feelings never surface. Human beings are “walking contradictions.” They are mysterious. Therefore, as in life, the most fascinating acting is surrounded by mystery. We all have secrets, and our characters are no exceptions. Sharing too much of your analysis with others will destroy “your” mystery.

During the period of analysis and study, read the play “very carefully” many times. Take note of every hint, every clue that helps you bring your creation to life. You should consider:

1. What “you” do and don’t do;
2. What “you” say and don’t say (keeping in mind that characters sometimes exaggerate and lie);
3. What the other characters in the play say about “you” and do to “you” (always taking into consideration the other character’s perceived purpose);
4. What actions are suggested in “your” lines; and
5. What comments and descriptions the playwright offers in the stage directions (remembering that not all stage directions are appropriate for your interpretation and that many times they are simply a stage manager’s notes from the first production).

From there, your analysis must advance into a detailed autobiographical investigation. The dramatist provides enough information for you to understand the motivating force and the essential traits of the character, but you must almost always supply an imaginary background to round out the essentials mined from the text. Begin by writing down what you perceive as logical and true. Your initial thoughts, however, will change—or evolve—as you go through the rehearsal process and as you merge with your character.

To be valid, a character autobiography\* should contain only details that logically extend from those provided by the dramatist. To be useful, it should contain only those particulars of specific behavior that can guide the actor’s choice of objectives and relationships.

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\* Some people refer to this as a character biography. We feel that approach will interfere with your ability to think in the first person. Therefore, we refer to it as an autobiography, written in the first person from your character’s point of view.

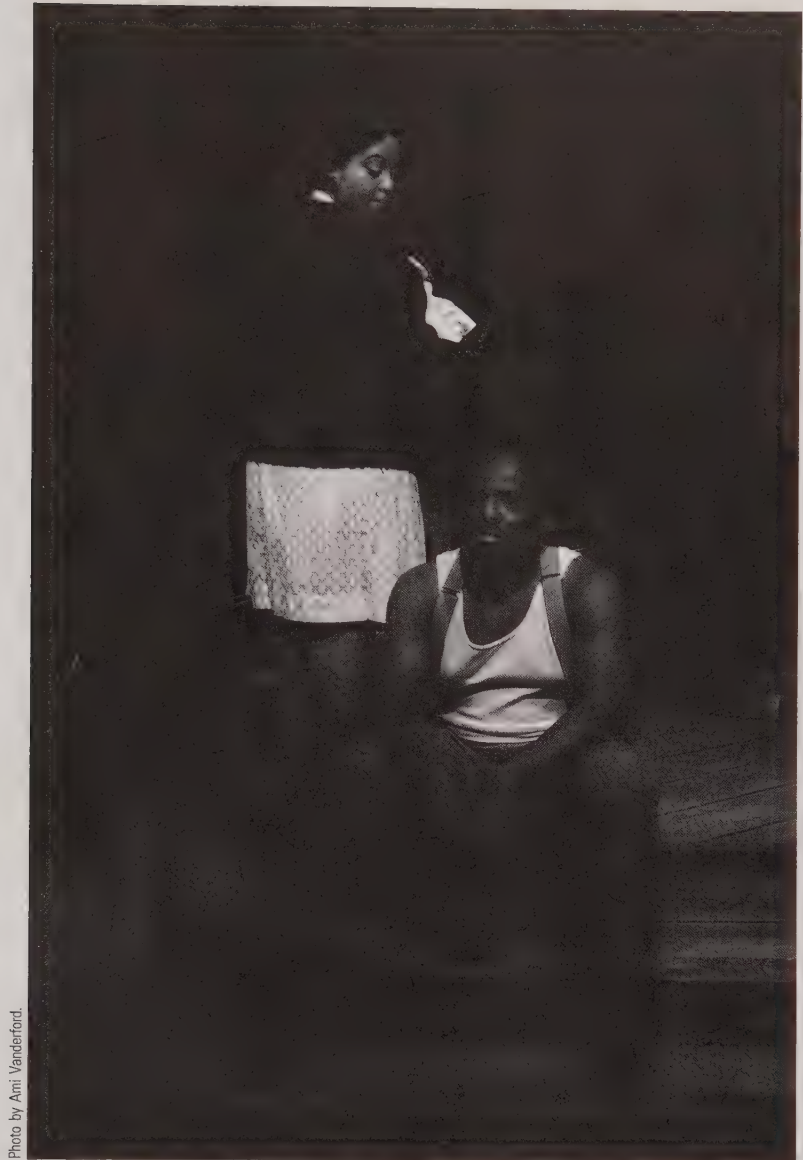


Photo by Ami Vanderford

**FIGURE 8.3**

A scene from the University of Memphis Department of Theatre and Dance's production of *Fences*. Directed by Alice Rainey Berry; costume design by Daniel Mathews; lighting design by Brian Reinitz; scenic design by Jay Deen. Mystery surrounds the character of Troy Maxson. Hidden secrets intrigue the audience and make the performance infinitely more interesting.

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Your character's autobiography will put you on closer terms with the character you are playing, and you should prepare one as a regular part of your analysis procedure. Write down "your" images, thoughts, and inner

monologues. Again, this is *not* a limitation; it is a means to openness and free expression. Full knowledge of your character that comes through analysis gives you more choices in the rehearsal process. Conversely, failure to write down your character's thoughts results in vague decisions that are difficult to repeat with consistency. Discoveries will be purely accidental, and you will stunt the growth of your character.

You may begin your character autobiography by asking "yourself" the following questions. Your answers to these queries will undoubtedly overlap. In answering one question, you will allude to another one. This is expected. You should not attempt to isolate one from another.

## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WORKSHEET

1. **Who?**
  - a. What is my personal history? (This should be a thorough investigation of your second plan, which is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.)
  - b. What is my present state of being?
  - c. How do I perceive myself physically?
    - i. Mentally?
    - ii. Morally?
    - iii. Socially?
    - iv. Economically?
    - v. Spiritually?
  - d. What are my emotional relationships?
  - e. What am I wearing?
2. **When?**
  - a. What is the year?
  - b. What is the date and time?
  - c. What is the weather?
  - d. How does "when?" affect my life?
3. **Where?**
  - a. In what city am I?
  - b. What are my immediate surroundings?
  - c. How do the city and immediate surroundings affect my life?
  - d. What are the social and spiritual customs and political tendencies of my family?
    - i. Neighborhood?
    - ii. Group?
    - iii. Society?
4. **What?**
  - a. What has just happened prior to the events in the script?
  - b. What is happening currently?
  - c. What is my attitude toward the unfolding events?
  - d. How does my attitude differ from that of my family, friends, or society?
  - e. What do I expect to happen in the future?



5. **Why?**
  - a. How would I define the units of action?
  - b. What is my simple objective for each unit?
  - c. What noun names would I give each unit?
  - d. What is my motivating force?
6. **How?**
  - a. What stands in my way of achieving my goals?
  - b. What is my “will” to get what I want?

Although the motivating force should be stated in a single phrase, the process of uncovering it is no simple task. Characters, like real human beings, are filled with psychological complexities. You must take pains to consider all the possibilities, finally stating the motivating force specifically and in terms that will stimulate you to action.

By now, it must be apparent that discovering the motivating force is the key to getting into the part. Important as it is, actors frequently fail to understand the basic motivation clearly, to name it accurately, and to feel it fully. This failure stems from two causes:

1. Many actors don’t study the play with enough care and imagination.
2. The motivating force—especially for a long and complex role—is frequently difficult to find.

You should not give up if you do not know the motivating force when you begin rehearsal; instead, keep searching throughout the creative process. During the rehearsal stage, you can play specific actions and realize the character’s simple objectives from scene to scene without knowing for certain how they relate to the motivating force. In fact, you may never be convinced that you have the absolute, final answer for some characters; however, the search must not be abandoned because the effort itself is of great value. Because of the ongoing nature of this process, your statement of the motivating force you are working with at any particular moment is always hypothetical. You must continue to explore it, test it, and be willing to change it as your understanding of the character and the play increases.

As we stated previously, analyzing your role is mostly a solitary assignment. It is your homework. Analysis does continue during rehearsal, but there are boundaries. Stanislavski, in the early years of the Moscow Art Theatre, sat around a table with his actors for weeks discussing every aspect of the play. During this time, they uncovered a wealth of information about the characters and their environment; however, Stanislavski discovered that their table work actually impeded their progress, and the characters lost some of their mystery. Simply talking about the role stood in the way of discovery through the psychophysical process. Discussion is very important, but you must learn to do it in conjunction with the rehearsal process. As you—with the guidance of your director—determine physical actions, they must connect with your psychological choices. Thus, as a serious actor, you must study the play, research “your” world, and answer many questions, but you must also understand that the analytical process is merely a means to discovering physical actions. And the Method of Physical Actions is the only path to

inspiration onstage. Analysis is not an end in itself. Therefore, you must stop talking so much in rehearsals and work on action. Your character's autobiography is an extremely important part of the process that you work on primarily outside rehearsals and test and modify during rehearsals.

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## EXERCISE 8.1

### CONSTRUCTING A CHARACTER AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Select a role from one of the plays listed in the online appendix, "Suggested Scene Study for Undergraduate Actors," or choose a character from another standard full-length script. Using the autobiographical worksheet as the basis for analysis, write a complete autobiography. State your initial idea of the character's motivating force in terms that are true to the dramatist's conception and that could stimulate you to action in playing the part.

You are attempting to give birth to an imaginary person, a being filled with mystery and secrets, an individual who has experienced a lifetime of emotions and who is more complex than the most sophisticated computer. Without proper analysis, many actors simply do not have enough information to fully "penetrate" their characters. Thus, they play only the most primitive impressions. To fulfill his need for immediate gratification, such an actor plays the result rather than building his character one step at a time. Actors simply cannot grasp all the complexities of characterization at the beginning of the rehearsal and analytical process. Just as a fetus grows in the womb, your character takes time to gestate.

To begin the process of building your character, choose a sequence of actions in which you can most readily believe. Think of it as the foundation on which your character will grow. Your sequence of actions need not be the first scene in which your character appears, and you shouldn't concern yourself with the level of importance of your selection. It is simply the chain of events with which you most identify with your character—one in which you can find an analogous emotion, one that stimulates your imagination, or one in which you can readily become "possessed" with the objective. From there, you begin the gestation process that leads to the development of the entire imaginary human being.

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## EXERCISE 8.2

### COMPLETING THE THOUGHTS

In her Stanislavski-based book, *Free to Act*, Mira Felner developed this exercise. Using the same character as you did for Exercise 8.1, complete the following thoughts from your character's point of view. Let your responses be as spontaneous and uninhibited as possible. The more you know your character, the more revealing your answers will be.

- I am happiest when ...
- I am most upset by ...
- If I had it my way, ...
- I don't understand why ...
- I wish ...
- I love to ...
- I hate ...
- I'm afraid ...
- Sometimes I think I ...
- I like to think of myself as ...
- Other people perceive me as ...
- A person's family ...
- If I were in charge ...
- The first time I met him (or any character from the play), ...
- I love him (or her), but ...<sup>5</sup>

Did you learn anything new about your character? Were your responses consistent with “your” autobiography? This exercise is an excellent extension of your autobiographical worksheet.

## UNCOVERING THE UNITS OF ACTION

As an actor, your basic responsibility is to find, one by one, the numerous simple objectives and actions that taken together constitute your role. You carry out each action to satisfy a singular desire of your character, and each has a precise relation to your character's total behavior. Stanislavski referred to the smallest whole division of a play—one in which there is a distinct beginning, middle, and end—as a **unit of action** (or “unit” for short). Many actors refer to units as **beats**. For our purposes, however, we will return to Stanislavski's original phrase and refer to them as units, with the understanding that they are synonymous with beats. Regardless of their name, the transition between them is open to wide interpretation. Most new units are defined by a simple shift in the action—a “change of direction,” so to speak. According to Charles Marowitz, it is “a section of time confined to a specific set of continuous actions, or perhaps the duration of a mood or an internal state. As soon as our actions graduate to the next unit of activity, we can be said to be in the next beat of the scene.... It is characterized by one overriding emotional colour.”<sup>6</sup>

The actor and the director break down each scene into units so they can more precisely discuss the role and prepare its performance, in much the same way a conductor uses a “measure” to focus the musicians' attention on a particular part of a score. The units of action are comparable to the measures of a musical score in another way: They are primarily useful as rehearsal aids and should never be evident to the audience. “The analysis of the play's beats, the characters' actions, can and should be made before the actual staging of the play is begun,” wrote **Harold Clurman**. “The actors derive a basic direction from such analysis and from *the notation of the beats in their part-books* [italics ours], a guiding line that is the foundation for their entire work in the play. Without such groundwork, we may get a display of ‘general emotion’ but not the meaning of the play.” Your talent as an actor becomes evident in the manner in which you carry out these actions. Independent of talent, however, you must clearly present the units of action for the play to become a comprehensible and logical whole.<sup>7</sup>



## SCORING THE UNITS

In Part I, you scored your exercises based primarily on improvisational technique, which is free and open to interpretation. When working with an actual script, however, you must adhere to the playwright's words. You cannot improvise the scripted language of your character. Your physical actions must do the following:

- Reveal your character's inner life down to the smallest nuances and idiosyncrasies.
- Be as imaginative and original as possible within the limits of your character. Human beings can have enormous personalities, and they can also act irrationally and illogically given the circumstances. People are not consistent, but you must always consider the logic (or illogic) of your choices with regard to the personality of your character.
- Have purpose and move you toward the attempted achievement of a simple objective.
- Be absolutely truthful within the boundaries of the given circumstances.
- Be dynamic and infuse energy into your acting.
- Move forward the dramatic action of the play as a whole.<sup>8</sup>

Stanislavski stressed the necessity of seeing the role as a series of units. As soon as one simple objective that motivates a unit is satisfied, another desire arises that forms the basis for another unit. In earlier chapters, when we asked you to structure your work by clearly delineating a beginning, middle, and end to your score of physical actions, we were in effect dividing the exercise into units.

Every unit of action must be developed around a simple objective. After an objective has been determined, it stands as the primary motivation until the character successfully achieves it, or until the circumstances of the play force the character to move to a new unit and a new goal.

When you have defined the simple objectives, you must give each unit a **noun name**, a single word that characterizes the whole section. For example, you may call a particular unit "Confrontation." The noun name dictates certain behavior in your character and defines each unit. Only then will you *know* what the audience must understand. Defining each unit through a single word discloses its essence and propels the dramatic action forward.

Individual units must logically progress from one to another. Therefore, one noun name—the essence of that unit—understandably leads to the next. Beginning with the noun name "Confrontation," it may follow that the second unit is entitled "Debate." This, in turn, leads to the following sequence of units: "Allies," "Battle," "Confession," "Retreat," and "Reparations." These named units form a logical progression that extends throughout the play. The movement from one unit to the next—the development of the inner life of your character—illustrates what Stanislavski referred to as the **through-line of action**. He compared the through-line of action to a traveler on a long journey. The traveler, while moving toward his destination, comes into contact with many new people and diverse situations; all the while he continues on his expedition toward his goal.



Some professional actors do their analytical work in their heads, but it is important for you to learn to write out your complete score that includes your **score of psychological actions**, which then leads you to a corresponding score of physical actions, as we have explored in Chapters 3 through 7. The following example represents an actor playing the role of Petruchio in a production of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. It illustrates how he scores the psychological and physical actions in two units. The actual dialogue is copied (or pasted) onto the center of an 8½ × 11 piece of paper. The dotted line within the text shows where one unit ends and a new one begins. The left-hand column represents the score of psychological actions, including the unit number, the noun name, the character's simple objective, and obstacles. It is also appropriate to place any of the character's autobiographical information and internal thoughts in this column. The column on the right is the score of physical actions, corresponding to the psychological score on the left. The actor uses **blocking notations** (e.g., X, USL, DS, etc.) as a form of shorthand. The letters in the right-hand column followed by the description of an action match up with the superscripted letters placed within the text where the impulse for that action occurs. Some actors use circled numbers instead. This is simply a matter of preference, as long as you are consistent. Note that the unit numbers for the psychological score are continuous throughout the script, whereas the letters (or numbers) representing the physical score are renewed at the top of each page. This simplifies your work because your score of physical actions will be modified at every rehearsal. Finally, this example takes place on a **thrust stage** or three-quarters stage. Thus, when the actor X's (crosses) USL (upstage-left), he is still walking toward the audience.

PETRUCHIO:  
I pray you do. I'll attend her here—  
*Exeunt all but Petruchio.*

UNIT #23: Plan

Objective: To secure my financial independence, I must establish a plan to woo this wildcat by opposition.

Obstacles: Violent sounds emanating from other room; fear of unknown

And<sup>①</sup> woo her with some spirit when she comes!  
Say that she rail, why then I'll tell her plain  
She sings as sweetly as a nightingale.<sup>②</sup>  
Say that she frown,<sup>③</sup> I'll say she looks as clear  
As morning roses newly washed with dew.  
Say she be mute and will not speak a word,  
Then I'll commend her volubility<sup>④</sup>  
And say she uttereth piercing eloquence.<sup>⑤</sup>  
If she do bid me pack, I'll give her thanks  
As though she bid me stay by her a week.<sup>⑥</sup>  
If she deny to wed,<sup>⑦</sup> I'll crave the day  
When I shall ask the banns, and when be married.

① X DR to edge of stage

② Kneel

③ Pick up rose petal that has fallen on floor

④ Stand

⑤ X USL toward audience

⑥ Turn DS

⑦ Crumple petal and drop on floor

*Enter Katherina.*

## UNIT #24: Execution

Objective: To execute my plan, I must counter her violent attacks with kindness.

Obstacles: Kate's temper; her disdain; her unwillingness to reciprocate; flying objects and bodily fluids

But here she comes, and now, Petruchio, speak.<sup>⑨</sup>

Good morrow, Kate, for that's your name, I hear.

KATHERINA:

Well have you heard, but something hard of hearing—

They call me Katherine that do talk of me.

PETRUCHIO:

You lie, in faith, for you are called plain Kate,

And bonny Kate,<sup>⑨</sup> and sometimes Kate the curst.

But Kate,<sup>⑩</sup> the prettiest Kate in Christendom,

Kate of Kate-Hall,<sup>⑪</sup> my super-dainty Kate—  
For dainties are all Kates—and therefore,  
Kate,

Take this of me, Kate of my consolation:<sup>⑫</sup>

Hearing thy mildness praised in every town,<sup>⑬</sup>

Thy virtues spoke of and thy beauty sounded—

Yet not so deeply as to thee belongs—<sup>⑭</sup>

Myself am moved to woo thee for my wife.

⑨ Make eye contact, silence, then X R to L of table

(NOTE: As Pet moves, Kate keeps table between them.)

⑨ Duck to avoid being hit by flying centerpiece

⑩ X to US of table

⑪ Reacts to Kate's vulgar action

⑫ X DL to Kate

⑬ Wipe spit off face and smile

⑭ Grab Kate's hands

This is not the only way to score a script; it is one approach. Regardless of your eventual process, you must score your role. Remember, this is a working document. Your score lives and changes with every rehearsal. Do not “set it in stone.” Therefore, you should work in pencil—keeping a big eraser close at hand.

In the end, your psychological score of actions should help disclose your character's motivating force to the audience. You should eliminate all actions not related to this purpose. The audience understands the play by following a series of logical and expressive units. You must facilitate this by communicating a believable and logical progression of actions, all of which grow from the given circumstances of your role.

Although the idea of truth remains constant, the given circumstances and the world of the play differ wildly with every production. The seeming illogic of some modern and contemporary plays—especially those identified as theatre of the absurd—is deceptive. The dramatist has written the play for a specific purpose and has given the characters some pattern of behavior. To express the absurdity they find in contemporary life, they may require from the actor a series of illogical actions. But by using speech and actions illogically, by introducing the fantastic and the ridiculous, their purpose is to

express the absence of truth and meaning in modern society. As in the case of any drama, it is the actor's job to discover a motivating force that is truthful in the seemingly illogical pattern and to communicate it to the audience as clearly as possible.

Creating a character requires, more than anything else, the ability to follow a through-line of action. To do so, you must carefully perform each unit of action, always attempting to realize your objective and to relate each unit clearly to the one that follows it. A definite "terminal point" at the end of each unit and a firm "attack" at the beginning of each new unit give the play a sense of forward movement. There must also be clear cause-and-effect relationships between the units that illustrate the kind of analytical problem you will face in most plays, whether they be classic, modern, or contemporary.

### EXERCISE 8.3

### SCORING A ROLE

Using the preceding example, return to the same character for whom you completed the autobiographical worksheet earlier in this chapter. Study the breakdown of one scene very carefully. Then copy or cut and paste the script onto an 8½" × 11" sheet of paper. Divide the scene into units of action. In the left column, state your character's simple objectives and obstacles, and label and give a noun name for each unit. Notate precisely in the text where the impulses for action occur, and using corresponding notations in the right column, describe the physical actions using shorthand blocking notations where possible.

Characterization begins by breaking the role into small units of action, each with a clearly understood simple objective that moves the character toward accomplishing her overall goal. Discovering, enriching, and playing these units is a constant challenge throughout the rehearsals and performance. Few actors, even of the highest professional caliber (and after playing a role a great number of times), would claim they succeed in believing, with equal conviction, every unit. That, however, is the aim of all actors who seek to create art onstage, and they work to accomplish it at every rehearsal and performance. But they realize that failure to achieve complete belief at every moment does not indicate a bad actor any more than failure to return every ball indicates a bad tennis player. A good actor succeeds in believing a large proportion of what she does, just as a good tennis player succeeds in returning a high percentage of balls. The actor and the athlete both work to improve their technique to increase the ratio of their successes.

### INCORPORATING "YOUR" SECOND PLAN

Many of the people, places, and events mentioned in a script's dialogue do not actually appear in the play. Some images are mentioned only in passing by the playwright. Regardless, it is your responsibility to discover the truth behind every action your character takes and every mental picture your



Photo courtesy of Elon University Department of Performing Arts.

#### FIGURE 8.4

Christopher Wood (*above*) and Emily Rice in Elon University Department of Performing Arts' production of *Sweeney Todd*. Directed by Catherine McNeela; costume design by Jack Smith; lighting design by William Webb; scenic design by Dale Becherer. A well-defined second plan helps these two actors with this moment of macabre intimacy.

character imagines. Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, co-founder of the Moscow Art Theatre with Stanislavski in 1898, believed that an actor's ability to create and communicate real inner images resulted from the completion of



his *second plan*. Like Stanislavski, Nemirovich-Danchenko believed the audience must be made aware of the whole inner life of the character, his entire destiny, while he is onstage.

When you write “your” autobiography, you are using your imagination to construct a history, a past life of the character. Although such work is necessary for creating a believable person who can live and act within the given circumstances of the play, you must concentrate your efforts on those moments in the character’s life that the playwright chooses to dramatize. Besides incorporating everything in “your” autobiography, your character’s *second plan* incorporates the events that occur offstage during the course of the play. These events many times are extremely important to the development of the plot. You can make use of these actions by writing a narrative version of the entire story, curtain to curtain, from the point of view of your character, and by improvising actions that happen offstage.

## EXERCISE 8.4

## WRITING A SECOND PLAN

Using the same character you selected for the three previous exercises in this chapter, write a narrative of your character’s life that includes offstage events during the actual time covered by the play. Select an important offstage event in which your character is alone, score the units, and present it as a solo scene.

## FINDING THE OUTER FORM

Unless you have the ability to externalize your inner thoughts and feelings, you have no business onstage. Your external actions must influence the other actors and project into the audience. Most marginally talented actors have the ability to analyze and internalize a character. This, however, falls short of your goal. There must be communion with others. Otherwise, you would do just as well to stay home and “act” and “feel” for your own entertainment. If you fail to externalize your inner thoughts and feelings, you will never engage your psychophysical being. Your character will never project into the audience. The spectators will not follow the action, and your presence onstage will be illogical. Action is your only means to external expression, which is your sole purpose onstage.

You externalize your character through posture, manner of movement, degree of mobility, gestures, physical abnormalities, and all nonverbal modes of expression. You communicate through your character’s dialect, level of articulation, choice of words, and sentence structure. You reveal your character’s inner being through animation and the unique tempo-rhythms of physical and verbal actions. Clothing, makeup, and hair convey a great deal of information about your character’s self-perception. Personal objects (e.g., fans, pipes, canes, glasses, books, guns, etc.) become extensions of your imagined personality. Characters, as in life, are identified by their possessions. Everything the audience sees “you” do and hears “you” say, everything with

which “you” connect, everyone with whom “you” relate projects something about your character. *Externalizing* a character is arguably your most important responsibility. The audience suspends their disbelief when they trust what they see and hear. Therefore, you must find outward forms that will help the audience believe your character.

Externals also greatly help actors sustain belief in their characters. They use their bodies as expressive instruments to project their inner being, and their external decisions reinforce their internal convictions. An especially erect posture, with chin held high and nostrils pinched, as if constantly trying to locate a slightly offensive odor, might aid an actress in characterizing the overpowering Lady Bracknell in Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*. A mannerism of sucking his teeth might help an actor in demonstrating the vulgarity of Mr. Burgess in George Bernard Shaw’s *Candida*. Elia Kazan’s notebook for *A Streetcar Named Desire* outlines effective externals for the crude, simple, naïve, sensual character of Stanley Kowalski. He sucks a cigar. He annoyingly busies himself with other things while people are talking to him.

Dramas abound with opportunities for actors to use externals as a means of deepening and extending their characterizations. For instance, the actor playing Willy Loman in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* should examine the effect of carrying heavy sample bags on the physique of an elderly man. The rounded shoulders, the body leaning forward to balance the weight of the samples, the feet hurting from too much pressure, the eyes looking at the ground to search for obstacles—all these external manifestations can help create a truthful characterization of Willy’s exhaustion.

Sir Laurence Olivier often used makeup to help find his character. For example, he once told of developing the right type of nose as a key to a role. From this center, he could create a whole physical presence. However, Olivier would have been the first to emphasize that the external approach must be used in conjunction with internal motivation to develop a complete characterization.

When using externals as a means to characterization, you must observe two cautions:

1. Beware of clichés, the stereotyped mannerisms or properties that have been so frequently repeated they would occur immediately to even an unimaginative mind. For the audience, clichés no longer express individuality but only general types. They are the imitation of imitation, worn-out devices that can be executed mechanically. Consequently, they are powerless to aid in your belief in the character.
2. Be sure that the externalization either results from or leads to a specific need you can relate to your character’s motivating force.

The caution we emphasized about making externals serve the motivating force may be similarly stressed for all aspects of the characterization. Everything you do, say, or wear onstage should help either create the motivating force or satisfy it. The more clearly you understand how a particular detail relates to your goal, the more significant it will be to you and your audience.

The motivating force is the unifying factor in selecting both internal and external details of characterization. All your decisions must relate to your character’s motivating force; otherwise, they should be omitted. In fact, you

should even avoid external character choices that are merely neutral; that is, details that perhaps do not hinder but bear no inherent relationship to your character. Neutral decisions are weak. They have no benefit and can distort the plot. Whether “you” smoke or not, whether “your” hair is long or short, whether “you” drink beer or coffee, whether “you” wear boxers or briefs, should all be determined by “your” motivating force. Every detail should make a positive contribution to the total characterization.

As an actor in production, you must focus only on your own character. That is the part you play. That is your contribution. Through individual analysis, you break down the entire script into units, complete with noun names and simple objectives. Connecting the units allows you to clearly see the through-line of action, which in turn leads to the naming of your character’s motivating force. Keep in mind, however, that all this must naturally fit within the director’s concept of the production, and you must have the ability to infect your partners and project your character into the audience.

You may identify your motivating force only if you have carefully completed your unit analysis along the way. Remember, however, the units are simply markers as you travel toward your destination. You cannot ignore the markers because they lead the way. They are the fuel to be consumed on your journey. The markers also warn you of potential danger; they prevent you from wandering away from the path. However, you should not allow the markers to stand in your way. If you isolate the individual units and do not look at them as part of a connected whole, you will bog down in a multitude of shallow, unrelated details. They will merely confuse and frustrate you, as you lose sight of your destination. Analysis is your means to external freedom. It leads you to the path of discovery through the psychophysical process, as you work your way toward your character’s motivating force.

## EXPRESSING THE SUPER-OBJECTIVE

Richard Boleslavsky described the **super-objective** as the trunk of a great tree. The trunk is “straight, proportioned, harmonious with the rest of the tree, supporting every part of it. It is the leading strain; *‘Leitmotif’* in music; a director’s idea of action in a play; the architect’s foundation; the poet’s thought in a sonnet.” The actor, working with the director, interprets the trunk and then provides the branches, the elements that grow from the overall super-objective. The leaves on the tree come as a result of the union of the trunk and branches, “the brilliant presentation of the idea.” The author is the sap that flows and feeds the tree.<sup>9</sup>

Stanislavski said “everything should converge to carry out this super-objective.” Creating a character is the actor’s sole responsibility, but a single character is part of this much larger whole. Actors must relate their performance to the entire production. They must discover why the dramatist wrote the play, what she wanted it to say, and what emotional effect she wanted it to have on the audience. Ideally, the entire company will agree on the play’s super-objective, and each actor will in turn build his particular role in relation to this concept.



Earlier in this chapter, you learned that actors must analyze their characters with considerable care to determine the motivating force behind their actions. You will now discover that a dramatist uses a group of characters, all motivated by different and often conflicting desires, for the purpose of expressing an overall meaning. Further, you will see how each actor's role can help realize the author's intention.

Several sources help actors prepare to learn about the play. They will want to know something of the playwright's life and of the circumstances under which the play was written. Knowing that *The Tempest* was probably Shakespeare's last play, and that in Prospero's farewell to his art—the practice of white magic—Shakespeare was saying farewell to his supreme artistry as a dramatist and a poet, might help an actor realize the calm, the dignity, and the finality of the overall tone of this play. An actor in Molière's plays may use the knowledge that this playwright had a young wife and that, in his several plays in which an old man is married to a young girl, his observations came from his own experience. Some of O'Neill's plays are almost completely autobiographical, and knowing about his relation with his parents and his older brother and about his life as a young man in New London, Connecticut, might well help actors select actions to illuminate O'Neill's characters and help them communicate the world of the play.

## RESEARCHING THE WORLD OF THE PLAY

Good drama always reflects, if it does not deal directly with, the social, economic, and moral values of its time. It follows that actors need to learn about the prevailing social conditions at the time a play in which they are performing was written. An actor could hardly succeed in Congreve's *The Way of the World* without learning as much as possible about the amoral behavior of upper-class society in Restoration England. On a more modern note, it might help an actor preparing to perform in one of Bertolt Brecht's intriguing dramas to know that the enigmatic German playwright was ideologically a Communist and that most of his works protest against a capitalistic society. For the corpus of dramas written about the war in Vietnam, such as David Rabe's *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* or Sean Clark's *Eleven—Zulu*, the actor needs to learn about the conditions in training camps, the prevailing moral values in the combat zones, and the breach that combat experience is likely to cause between returning soldiers and their families.

One of the fascinating aspects of being an actor is the constant need to understand what makes people from all walks of life "tick." Depending on the production in which they are working at the moment, they may have to learn about conditions among coal miners in Pennsylvania or among sharecroppers in the South, or about the treatment of Native Americans. They may have to learn about proper procedure in a courtroom, in a hospital, or on a battleship.

To understand and perform in period plays, the actor must find out about the clothes worn at the time. Actors must know not only how to wear them and move in them but also why a certain fashion prevailed. Why were





Photo by Karl Hugh. Copyright Utah Shakespearean Festival.

## FIGURE 8.5

Michael David Edwards as Sir Andrew Aguecheek in the Utah Shakespearean Festival's 2007 production of *Twelfth Night*. Actors in this scene undoubtedly researched the actual socio-political world in which this production is set, and by employing their historical imaginations, they give inspired and unique performances of this frequently performed Shakespearean comedy.

stocks and farthingales worn in the Renaissance? Paniers and powdered wigs in the eighteenth century? How did Restoration gentlemen use a walking stick or Victorian ladies use a fan? Just as actors must fully understand the social, economic, and moral values of their characters' world, their understanding of fashion will make all period plays new and contemporary, clear, and relevant to a contemporary audience.

Where do actors find answers to questions about the playwright's life and the historical context relating to the world of the play? First, they must be voracious readers, concentrating on both the fiction and nonfiction of the period during which the play takes place. They should study biographies of their playwright and of famous actors and other people from the period. Pictures from the period—paintings, engravings, and photos—are excellent sources for makeup and clothing, but they also indicate the attitudes and atmosphere of the times. Good pictures arouse strong feelings, and good actors find ways to use the flavor of pictures in defining a believable character. For more recent periods, film and television, both fictive and documentary, provide excellent sources of behavior and social detail. To know too much about the play, the period, and the character is impossible.

The Internet is another invaluable source of information for the actor. Most young people are extremely comfortable surfing the net. We must always keep in mind, however, that the Web is unregulated, and actors should be forewarned to use only legitimate sources. John Smith's undergraduate term paper from Anywhere University that he posted on his blog last night does not constitute a legitimate source. However, Web articles found on such sites as the History Channel, Biography Channel, Learning Channel, Discovery Channel, A&E, MSNBC, CBS, ABC, CNN, *The New York Times* Online, or any other long-standing journal, magazine, or newspaper represent an important means to research your character and period.

The Web is an indispensable tool, but it is not the only tool. Many young actors naïvely believe that doing a quick search on sites such as Google, Yahoo!, Excite, or Ask Jeeves from the comfort of their dorm rooms is all the research they will need in creating a character or exploring a particular period. To them, the Web sometimes seems immeasurable and comprehensive; the lazier the actor, the more infinite, all-powerful and universal the Internet seems. Many of the most valuable resources can be found only in hard copy in libraries and bookstores. You must supplement the legitimate work you have done on your computer. Therefore, get out of your chairs, and go search “the stacks.” You will be amazed.

With that said, knowledge of such matters as period and style is essential to a full understanding of the playwright's meaning. Consequently, actors find it doubly important to obtain this information; in fact, they cannot afford to ignore it. It helps them prepare to read more intelligently their chief source for interpreting the play—the script itself.

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## EXERCISE 8.5

### RESEARCHING YOUR CHARACTER'S WORLD

Using the same character as you did for Exercises 8.1 through 8.4, research your character and the world of the play. Your work may include any of the resources discussed previously, plus any sources approved by your instructor. If you include critical analysis from a magazine, journal, book, or Internet source, you should highlight the portions of the text you found useful. From this point, you should include research as part of your overall analysis.

## RECOGNIZING THE FOUNTAINHEAD

Although the individual character autobiographies are mostly private, all actors in the performing company must agree on what a play is about, what meaning the dramatist had in mind, before the actors can fulfill their particular functions in the cooperative effort of a dramatic production. “The main theme must be firmly fixed in the actor's mind throughout the performance. It gave birth to the writing of the play. It should also be the fountainhead of the actor's artistic creation,” wrote Stanislavski. “In a play, the whole stream of individual, minor objectives—all the imaginative thoughts, feelings, and

actions of an actor—should converge to carry out the *super-objective* of the plot.” The character’s motivating force must be so closely tied to this overall idea that even the most insignificant detail, if it is not related to the super-objective, will stand out as superfluous or wrong.<sup>10</sup>

Harold Clurman stated emphatically that “no character of the play can be properly understood unless the play as a whole is understood.” He recognized that understanding the play resolves itself into one central theme—one basic action. He considered each play from the standpoint of the characters’ principal conflict, which in turn led him to the play’s core. “Saroyan’s *My Heart’s in the Highlands*, to its New York director, was the story of people eager to give things to one another—lovers all, in a sense. For me, Odets’ *Night Music* had to do with the search for a home.”<sup>11</sup>

Although finding the basic action is one of the director’s most important tasks and sharing it with her cast is one of her most important responsibilities, the actor, if he is to be a creative artist in his own right, needs to understand the meaning of the play through his own efforts. Only then can the actor be certain that it is *his*, that it has possessed every fiber of his imagination.

The meaning of a play cannot be determined solely from a study of its events. Story is rarely the unique feature of a dramatic work because essentially the same story may be used to express a variety of meanings. People who are interested only in the “story” of a play are missing a good deal of its value, and a production that offers the audience nothing more than story is realizing only a part of its possibilities.

The story of *Hamlet*, as long and complex as it is, can be summarized in five sentences. Prince Hamlet has suffered the loss of his father only two months before his mother’s marriage to his uncle. A ghost, whom he does not fully trust, informs the young prince that his uncle murdered his father. Unable to act until he discovers the truth, Hamlet “feigns” insanity as he furthers his investigation. After he proves his premonition correct, the young prince exacts revenge on his father’s murderer. In the end, all the principal characters die, leaving Fortinbras to “pick up the pieces.” Simple, right? In fact, if this story is all the play offers, it cannot be distinguished from half the classic tragedies ever written.

Even a cursory reading of this most brilliant play reveals the importance of a second dramatic element—character. Hamlet is an infinitely complex character, filled with frustration, wit, contradiction, and courage. Over the past four centuries, the most brilliant scholars have tried to understand his multifaceted relationships with his dead father, as well as with Gertrude, Ophelia, Claudius, and his comrades. These are complicated human beings—people, no matter their station in life, with whom we relate. We feel their joy, their pain, their desires, their frustrations, and their sense of revenge. We are engaged with their stories, but we bond with the individuals.

Story and character combine to form **plot**, and these two elements working in concert with each other allow the dramatist to make an observation on life. We have emphasized many times that revealing this super-objective is the actor’s basic purpose onstage.



What observation did Shakespeare make in *Hamlet*? The play cannot be merely the story of a son's revenge. The story is not simply "a play dealing with the effect of a mother's guilt upon her son," as suggested by T. S. Eliot.<sup>12</sup> Such a story has little point unless it is directed toward some further end. What purpose does the action of the play serve? Of course, we become engaged by the story and empathize with the needs and emotions of the characters, but that does not relieve us from the responsibility of trying to determine the playwright's purpose, the super-objective. To be significant, any production must attempt to make clear the playwright's observations as interpreted by the artists associated with that particular performance.

Following this reasoning, the super-objective in *Hamlet*, according to Edward Gordon Craig, is the story of "man's search for the truth."<sup>13</sup> Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, on the other hand, attempts to show us an arrogant, blind, and godless "search for wisdom." Euripides' *The Bacchae* tells the story of the consequence of disobedience to the gods through the basic conflict between Pentheus and Dionysus. Thus, the super-objective may be stated as "the necessity for obedience to the gods."

Regardless of the play on which you are working, after you discover the super-objective, you must be unwavering in your commitment to this major purpose. All the events leading to the play's climax must serve this end. Your single and steadfast goal is to clearly communicate this meaning to the spectators because the through-line of action is complete only after the audience absorbs its significance.

The next step in interpreting the script is for the actors (and the director) to determine the basic action that grows out of its meaning because this action provides the play's dramatic conflict and makes clear the playwright's message. Harold Clurman referred to this overarching action that embodies the meaning as the **spine**. It serves as a constant guide to the director and the actors because it is the unifying factor for the super-objective of the entire play. To illustrate this concept, we will examine *Romeo and Juliet*, relating the spine to the super-objective.

The play opens with a violent outbreak of the rivalry between the Montagues and the Capulets. Starting with a comic quarrel between the servants of the two houses, it next involves Benvolio and Tybalt (the younger generation), and finally the old men themselves, old Capulet calling for his sword and old Montague calling Capulet a villain. They are restrained from combat only by the jibes and pleadings of their wives. Only when the prince of Verona arrives does this unseemly brawl come to an end. It is a nasty fight, and it disgusts us with its violence and its pointlessness.

In subsequent scenes, we see the Capulets and the Montagues not as enemies but as parents. We see they are not ogres but concerned parents, the Montagues with finding the cause of Romeo's depression and the Capulets with finding a suitable husband for Juliet. We wonder about this mixture of filial concern and violent hatred; that we first see Romeo and Juliet in relation to their parents is significant to understanding the play.

The conflict develops rapidly. In quick succession, we see the meeting of the lovers, the balcony scene (death to Romeo if he should be discovered),





Photo courtesy of the USC School of Theatre

### FIGURE 8.6

A scene from the University of Southern California School of Theatre's production of *The Pajama Game*. Directed by Kelly Ward; costume design by Kristen Kopp; lighting design by T. Stirling Burk; scenic design by Adam Blumenthal. To maximize creativity, these actors must fully understand the fantasy world of the Sleep-Tite Pajama Factory, as well as have a clear understanding of the super-objective as determined by the director.

the marriage, the killing of Mercutio and Tybalt, Romeo's banishment, and the death of the lovers in the tomb. We glory in the greatness of their love, but we loathe the senseless "canker'd hate" that brought about their tragedy. We are filled with wonder at their sacrifice and grateful that the ancient rivalry has ended. But how unnecessary! The parents are left with golden statues instead of living children, and they are faced with a realization of the awful price Romeo and Juliet have paid.

What is Shakespeare attempting to say with this story? What is the play's super-objective? It can probably be stated in some embodiment of the old bromide, "love conquers all." If we communicate it clearly, the audience should be sickened by the hatred between the families and rejoice for the love that overcame such bitterness. We want them to know that cankered hate brings tragedy and suffering and that it must ultimately yield to the force of love. The play's *spine*—the basic action that embodies the meaning we have just

interpreted—could be stated as “to overcome all obstacles in the path of love.” A production that uses this spine to guide the actors and the director throughout rehearsals and performance could provide an unforgettable experience for the audience.

To further demonstrate the concept of the spine and its relation to the super-objective, we will look quickly at two additional classical plays. In Aristophanes’ wildly popular comedy *Lysistrata*, we may reveal the super-objective, “a feminine consciousness in a world dominated by men is the only means to solving major conflicts” by unveiling the play’s spine, “sexual ritual has the power to domesticate the primitive energy found in war.” In the world of *Lysistrata*, the “happy idea” is that women are on top. If mothers ran the world, he is saying, war would not exist. The late medieval play *Everyman* embodies the anxieties of its age, a time when people seemed more preoccupied with death and the afterlife than with life itself. In this play, however, the author, who remains anonymous, was attempting to show a successful journey to death that parallels what a successful journey through life should be (the spine). Therefore, the super-objective is not “how to die well” but rather “how to live well.” “For after death amends may no man make.”

Beginning actors sometimes have a mistaken notion that careful analysis destroys spontaneity. This attitude is difficult to defend. Acting, like any other art, is a conscious process. Spontaneity is fruitful only after careful study directs it toward the accomplishment of a purpose. The resistance to analysis may be especially strong in the case of comedy, where it is natural for the actor to assume that the purpose is simply to “be funny.” Actually, a dramatist’s basic intention is no different in comedy than in the so-called serious types of drama; the difference, if any, lies in the treatment. Successful actors accept without question the responsibility to know the meaning and spine of every play they undertake.

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## EXERCISE 8.6

### RELATING THE SUPER-OBJECTIVE TO YOUR CHARACTER

Return to the same character from Exercises 8.1 through 8.5, and determine the spine and super-objective of the entire play. State the meaning briefly and clearly. Then list your character’s traits that are important to the total meaning, and decide to what extent you might need to comment on them to make that meaning clear. This also should become part of your overall analysis from here out.

# CHAPTER 9

## Interpreting the Lines

*"Words, words, words."*

**William Shakespeare**

Interpretation of the lines begins with your first reading of the script and doesn't stop until the lights fade on the final performance. One of your prime responsibilities is to communicate the dramatist's lines to the audience. Line interpretation coincides with your exploration and discovery of your character's motivating force and the super-objective of the entire play. While you are discovering the physical actions, you must dissect each line of the play, exploring every possible meaning.

The basis for effective interpretation is a good voice. The effectiveness and range of actors largely depends on their ability to use their voices and shape their speech. Vocal training greatly improves the actor's effectiveness. As stated before, one of our basic assumptions is that all serious actors undertake organized voice training at the same time they are studying the principles of acting presented in this book.

The past few decades have seen a tremendous increase in the number of master voice teachers specializing in the problems of the actor. Primarily through the influence of such seminal thinkers and teachers as **Arthur Lessac**, **Edith Skinner**, and **Kristin Linklater**, the training of the actor's voice (as well as his body) is considered a fundamental priority in good acting programs everywhere.

These teachers have shown that, assuming the absence of physiological defects, no voice is so poor that it will not respond to proper training, and no voice is so fine that it could not be better if given the advantage of proper exercise. Whatever program of voice training actors undertake, they should

try to accomplish several objectives. For instance, in training their voices, actors should seek to acquire the following:

- **Volume**, so their voices may be heard without difficulty. Onstage, even quiet, intimate scenes must be heard in the rear of the theatre. Jerzy Grotowski emphasized this objective: “Special attention should be paid to the carrying power of the voice so that the spectator not only hears the voice of the actor perfectly but is also penetrated by it as if it were stereophonic.”<sup>1</sup>
- **Relaxation**, so their voices will not tire unduly during a long performance, and so they will not involuntarily raise their pitch during climactic scenes. Relaxation means that the column of air carrying the sound flows freely and is not constricted by tension in the throat or the jaw. Voice tension creates undesirable empathic responses in the audience, impairs actors’ expressiveness, and can cause permanent damage to their vocal mechanisms.
- **Quality**, so their voices are pleasant to hear and capable of expressing varying emotional states. A voice that is pleasant to hear is one of the actor’s most prized attributes and is to a large extent a matter of resonance.
- **Flexibility**, so their voices are capable of a variety of volumes, qualities, and pitches. A good voice is capable of adapting to a large range of demands with maximum ease.
- **Energy**, so the voice commands attention and makes others want to listen. It is especially important to guard against a habit (common among young actors) of “fading out”—letting the energy diminish—at the ends of sentences or phrases. In speaking, as in golf or tennis, one must learn to “follow through.”

Speech training should improve the following:

- **Articulation**, so the actor can be readily understood, even in passages requiring rapid speech. Although not all characters are articulate, all actors must be. Good articulation, achieved primarily through careful attention to forming the consonants, is essential to clear speech. A story is told of a great British actress who evaluated the work of an aspiring student with the comment, “Poor dear, no consonants.”
- **Pronunciation**, so that it is free from slovenliness and provincial influences. This objective is becoming increasingly important. Television and motion pictures that reach audiences all over the country cannot use actors whose speech identifies them with a particular region, unless regional speech is essential to the character they are playing. Absolute absence of colloquial speech is necessary for classic plays, which emphasize the universality of the characters, not their individual idiosyncrasies.
- **Artful control of tempo and rate**, so the actor can convey satisfactorily the psychological and physiological connotations of human discourse.



Perhaps no other aspect of speech relates so closely to an actor's sensitivity to the complexities of her material. Tempo also is established by proper cue pickup, so the performance moves at a pace appropriate for audience comprehension.

Most of the notable vocal training techniques we have recommended rightly focus on these aspects of voice and speech. Interpreting the character's lines falls more in the realm of acting technique; therefore, we shall consider that subject at this point in our overview. The art of interpretation, meaning what the actor expresses and why, is a necessary part of the study of acting, no matter what vocal training technique is used.

In earlier chapters, we noted that characters speak for the same reason that they act—to satisfy some basic desire. The question always in an actor's mind as he seeks to interpret his lines is “Why does the character say what he says at this particular moment?”

## EXPLORING THE SUBTEXT

“Words are pig shit,” declared French poet and playwright Antonin Artaud. You cannot act words. Words have no meaning. When Polonius asks, “What do you read, my lord?” Hamlet responds with, “Words, words, words.” **Subtext** gives meaning to your words. Stanislavski often proclaimed, “Without subtext, there is no theatre.” Just as *subtext of behavior* defines the characters' actions, *subtext of words* underlies their every sound. Subtext influences everything onstage. It is the reason we go to the theatre. Subtext makes your words distinct. It colors your meaning, making it unique and unrepeatable. Every sound you utter must have a specific internal justification. Subtext allows you to transform a phrase into a verbal action by supplying this justification.

To find the subtext of words, you must discover a character's motivation beneath her lines. In seeking this motivation, you must consider (1) how a line helps your character accomplish her simple objective and (2) how a line relates to its context, especially to the preceding line. A line that does not help your character accomplish her purpose is one of those details that Stanislavski said stands out as “superfluous or wrong.” A line that is not related to its context will baffle the audience because it will seem pointless and illogical.

The real significance of a line is rarely in the meaning of the words themselves or in the literal information they convey. Such a simple dialogue as

A: What time is it?

B: Eleven.

has no dramatic significance until the meaning beneath the lines is known. Why does one character ask the time? What is in the other character's mind when he answers?

These words can convey a number of different meanings, depending on the circumstances under which they are spoken.



Photo courtesy of Elon University Department of Performing Arts

**FIGURE 9.1**

Natalie Newman in a scene from Elon University Department of Performing Arts' production of *A Little Night Music*. Directed by Catherine McNeela; costume design by Tracy Justus; lighting design by William Webb; scenic design by Dale Becherer. Without subtext, words and actions have no meaning. Even while singing, internal justification must underscore every word and sound.

**Example #1:** Prisoner with a priest on death row awaiting execution.

*Line*

A: What time is it?

B: Eleven.

*Subtext*

A: How much longer?

B: About an hour.

**Example #2:** Students listening to a dull and seemingly endless lecture.

*Line*

A: What time is it?

B: Eleven.

*Subtext*

A: Shoot me. I'm in hell.

B: It's almost over.

**Example #3:** Young lovers making out in the back of a car.

*Line*

A: What time is it?

B: Eleven.

*Subtext*

A: I gotta go home.

B: It's early.

**Example #4:** Co-workers preparing an important presentation.

*Line*

A: What time is it?

B: Eleven.

*Subtext*

A: We still okay?

B: Oh, my god! We missed our appointment!

As an actor, you must know and think your character's subtext, as it flows like an underground river just beneath the surface. Sometimes the text and subtext coincide or agree; however, you must always search for conflict between them. Conflict between what the character thinks and what he says creates drama. Stanislavski believed that "Contradiction between the text and the subtext makes the word unexpected, vivid, and significant."<sup>2</sup> As illustrated previously, with any given line, there exists an opposite meaning, an undercurrent. Always playing the literal denotation of a word is dull. Look for alternatives. Search for **opposites**. Human beings do not always say what they think. They tell little white lies. They exaggerate. They deceive. Subtext clarifies the story for the audience; yet keeping them off guard by exploring opposites keeps them interested. It deepens their experience. Contradiction also helps engage other characters in strong transactions. Remember what we said about **mystery** and secrets in Chapter 8. It is through unpredictable subtext that you must attempt to affect the behavior of other characters in the scene and to add color and meaning to your performance.



Photo by Chris Richards.

## FIGURE 9.2

Amy Shuttleworth (*Medea*) in a scene from the University of Arizona School of Theatre Arts' production of *Medea*. Directed by Brent Gibbs; costume design by Patrick Holt; lighting design by Zachary Ciaburn; scenic design by Breanna Riley. Connected to opposites is the human capacity to find warmth in every scene of every play. **Humor** is the affection of human beings in every situation—including the most tragic. It is not about "being funny" but rather about the interchange between people.

Your success in communicating your personal interpretation of a role lies to a very considerable extent in your choice of subtext. You must speak the text that the dramatist has written, but the subtext is your own contribution. It demonstrates your insight into the role and sensitivity to the play. Subtext is grounded in the motivating force and in the simple objectives of the units, both of which have been explored in the past few chapters. In fact, subtext is the vehicle by which imagination and interpretation connect with performance.

An example of how subtext affects meaning (in this case, not just of a single speech but of an entire play) is Katherina's famous "advice" at the end of *The Taming of the Shrew*, in which she describes the responsibilities of a dutiful wife. Katherina is a headstrong, willful woman who has been "tamed" by and wed to Petruchio. He wants to complete the taming by having Katherina show her obedience at the wedding banquet. With one choice of subtext, the speech makes it plain that he has brought Katherina to submission. With another choice, we know she is not tamed at all but has learned to carry on the battle of the sexes in a more subtle way. For this second choice, Petruchio's response—his inner monologue while she is speaking—also has a significant effect on the total meaning. If he does not understand her subtext but takes the words for their surface value, the tables have been turned completely, and now Katherina will dominate their relationship. If, on the other hand, he understands her subtext, even though the other characters do not, he and Katherina will clearly have a lively marriage.

In *The Zoo Story*, by Edward Albee, the confrontation between Jerry and Peter over a park bench leads to Jerry's suicide. The opening moment of the play demonstrates how important a clear subtext is to a play's successful performance. As the play begins, Peter is seated on a bench reading a book. Jerry's objective in his opening line, "I've been to the zoo. I said I've been to the zoo. *MISTER, I'VE BEEN TO THE ZOO!*" is more than "to become louder until he notices me." That would distort the author's purpose and create a willful, self-centered hoodlum who might frighten Peter immediately and cause him to leave. Instead, the actor playing Jerry wants to keep Peter there, so his subtext must include the pain and desperation of a person at the end of his rope. What Jerry thinks is as important as what he says.

Stanley's subtext in the scene with Lulu from *The Birthday Party*, by Harold Pinter, prepares the audience for the visit by the mysterious Goldberg and McCann. If his reason for refusing to leave the house is not specific and substantial, the word games with Lulu and his offer to take her anywhere lose all importance. The actor must know that Stanley is in danger and that his options of hiding in the house or running away are ways of avoiding a dreaded confrontation. The net result of the scene would be mere mental gymnastics without the underpinning of fear, which can be established only through subtext.

In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Maggie is determined to have a child by Brick. The child is an economic necessity, but a Maggie whose subtext is based only on her own survival becomes a shrew, which is not the playwright's intention. Maggie is also full of positive life force, and her desire to achieve security is reinforced by her honest caring for Brick. If the actress misses this love, the



pain of Brick's rejection would be hollow and unmoving. If we are to care about Maggie, the subtext has to contain the love along with the ambition.

People go to the theatre to "hear" the subtext; they can read the text in greater comfort at home.

The preceding examples should make it clear that finding the subtext of a line is not the same as paraphrasing it or restating the words of the author in the words of the actor. Paraphrasing may be necessary when surface meaning is not immediately clear; indeed, you may find it especially worthwhile to restate in your own words the lines of a verse play. But the paraphrase will not tell you what is beneath the line and how it relates to the dramatic action and to the character's motivating force. Finding the subtext begins with understanding the character's purpose in saying the line.

## EXERCISE 9.1 INVESTIGATING SUBTEXT

A helpful exercise is to find different subtexts for the same line and to speak the subtext immediately after you have said the text. You can create your own simple lines, but here are two examples to get you started.

### Example #1:

<i>Line</i>	<i>Subtext</i>
I love you	As a friend.
I love you	If you force me to say it, I will.
I love you	How can you treat me this way?
I love you	I don't ever want you to doubt it.

### Example #2:

<i>Line</i>	<i>Subtext</i>
Please	I need your help.
Please	May I?
Please	You're crazy.
Please	I beg you.

Now, write at least two possible subtexts for each of the following lines. Speak each line, followed by your first choice of subtext. Then speak it without saying the second choice aloud, making clear its different meaning.

Shut up	Terrific	I can't believe it
You're beautiful	Baby	Don't cry
I hate your guts	Get out of here	Sorry
Thank you so much	Liar	Kiss me
You're late	You shouldn't have	You're crazy
Fine	Wow	Hello

## FINDING THE VERBAL ACTION

The interpretation of words is *verbal action*. You must use the words, expressing your inner life and attitude through every utterance. Verbal action is stronger than physical action. It is the drive, the purpose, behind every line. It is the means by which you communicate your inner relationship with yourself, your partners, and your world. The inner images stirred by your words can make an entire audience jump with fright or howl with excitement. Verbal action is the means with which to accomplish your objectives.

In the example at the beginning of the previous section, when A asks, “What time is it?” meaning “How much longer?” the verbal action is to hold back the time. When the character means “Shoot me. I’m in hell,” the verbal action is to get out of a dull lecture or to make the time go faster. And when A means “I gotta go home” or “We still okay?” the inherent action is to sound an alert.

To summarize, then, the significance of a line is not on the surface but beneath it; the real meaning is found in the subtext because it provides the justification, motivation, and interpretation behind the role. When you speak a line, you must think simultaneously of the words you are saying, their subtext, and their inherent verbal action.

Let us illustrate this crucial point with examples from Oscar Wilde’s famous satire on snobbery, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. When the haughty Lady Bracknell speaks slightly of the family background of Cecily Cardew, Cecily’s guardian, Jack Worthing, replies with the following line.

<i>Line</i>	<i>Subtext</i>	<i>Verbal Action</i>
JACK: Miss Cardew is the granddaughter of the late Mr. Thomas Cardew of 149 Belgrave Square, S.W.; Gervase Park, Dorking, Surrey; and the Sporran, Fifeshire, N.B.	My ward is a person of excellent family connections that may be quite as acceptable in English society as are your own, Lady Bracknell!	To counter Lady Bracknell’s assertion.

Based on his verbal action, Jack says one thing, but his subtext is quite different. Earlier, Jack has been informed that Lady Bracknell hardly approves of him either.

<i>Line</i>	<i>Subtext</i>	<i>Verbal Action</i>
JACK: May I ask why not?	I am sure I don’t see why she doesn’t approve of me. I am every bit as good as she is.	To declare “my” equality.

The choice of the subtext determines to a considerable degree the overall effect of a line—whether it will be comic, pathetic, or melodramatic. These lines from *The Importance of Being Earnest* are, of course, comic. Their subtexts must help point up the ridiculous seriousness with which the characters take themselves.

## RELATING THE LINES TO THE MOTIVATING FORCE

The subtext and the verbal action, both significant in interpreting a line, do not by themselves disclose its significance. You determine this by relating the meaning to your motivating force. Understanding how each line serves to help the character get what she wants will give you a better chance of making the motivating force clear to the audience.

Although in any circumstances the character may be motivated in one of several ways, you must make a clear and unequivocal commitment to a motivating force before you can give a line its full value. Recall the situation in which A is on death row. The actor might decide that the condemned person feels only the primal urge to live, that he is hoping for a reprieve from the governor, or even hoping blindly for a miracle. With such a motivating force, his asking for the time will be essentially a cry for help. Instead, he might decide that the person has accepted his death as inevitable, in which case his motivating force might be “to seek redemption,” and his line might be a plea for more time in which “to make atonement.” Another interpretation might be that even at the point of death, the person is filled with the same bitterness that led him to commit the crime and is determined to give no one the satisfaction of seeing any sign of remorse. In this case, the line would strengthen his motivating force “to refrain from repenting.” In any case, after your motivating force has been decided, you must stick to it and follow it wherever it takes you as you interpret the lines.

Confusion often arises from the use of a variety of terms to describe the actor’s relationship to the role and the relationship of the role to the whole play. For clarity, let us review the definitions of those terms as we use them:

- **Motivating force.** The character’s long-range goal. It gives the character a sufficient reason to pursue the course of action demanded by the play.
- **Super-objective.** The theme or basic line of the play; the term is synonymous with the *spine* of the play. In this context, it is a directional term. The motivating force of each role (sometimes referred to as the character’s super-objective) must be compatible with the super-objective of the entire play.
- **Through-line of action.** The progressive movement from one *unit* of the play to the next. It assumes a series of consistent and logical actions that form a pattern of behavior that is the route an actor takes to her character’s motivating force. The attempt to fulfill the objectives of the character against a series of obstacles moves the play to a conclusion, and the through-line of action is the thread that links all the character’s actions.

## RELATING THE LINES TO THE SUPER-OBJECTIVE

You also must know how your lines serve the super-objective and how they aid in communicating the play’s central idea to the audience. This problem has been anticipated in such previous steps as (1) finding the character’s motivating force—a process in which the lines were an important consideration, (2) relating this fundamental desire to the meaning of the play as a whole, and (3) finding the subtext and the verbal action, which, as we have seen, emerge only after the lines have been related to the motivating force.

After completing these steps, you will likely understand how the dramatist intended each line to aid in expressing its own meaning. For example, knowing that the playwright Jean-Paul Sartre believed that all people are trapped in their feelings of shame and guilt and that he used this theme in many of his works will aid in developing each character in his classic play, *No Exit*. Sonia Moore illustrates this concept:

Like many other modern playwrights, Sartre is preoccupied with people's inability to have healthy relationships. His heroes are lonely; they need each other but are unable to approach and reach each other. Sartre's idea is that a man is always surrounded by a wall as if he were in prison. People torture themselves with constant guilt feelings, and they are also tortured by the condemnation they see in the eyes of others.... Their attempts to break loose from this hell are really attempts to regain their feeling of innocence. But they cannot. Dissatisfaction with oneself makes it impossible to relate to people. The hell in the play represents the world in which a man must live whether he wants to or not. Sartre believes that a man must create for himself the values to live by. It is what a man does that defines him. By creating his own values, he creates himself, or as Sartre says, finds an exit. Sartre believes that man chooses his values and makes himself.<sup>3</sup>

Before you can begin creating your individual role in Sartre's play, you must understand the character's feelings of isolation, feelings of guilt, his burning desire to escape, and his frustration when he discovers the futility of his actions. You will fully understand your character only if you understand the author's meaning in the entire script.

Every unit of action must be carefully examined in the context of the super-objective as interpreted by each particular production. No element of the production is excused from this basic demand. The actor's task is to hold to this interpretation with an unyielding grip and to make everything she says or does flow from some variation on the theme. Actors must turn the interpretation into action, and subtext is one of their major tools for doing so.

Once again, Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* can serve as a contrasting example of the problem of relating the lines to the super-objective. This play is a satire on the snobbish upper classes at the close of the nineteenth century, who sought to relieve their boredom by concentrating on inconsequentialities. Wilde saw the comic possibilities in the affectations of such people, and he ridiculed them good-naturedly in this farce. The plot has to do with two young ladies whose sole requirement for a husband, apparently, is that his name be Ernest, a requirement that compels both Jack and Algernon to arrange to be rechristened. The actors in this play must see that their lines serve Wilde's purpose of having fun at the expense of these people.

The following dialogue drips with Jack's boredom and underscores the eagerness with which Algernon engages in trivial pursuits:

**ALGERNON:** ... may I dine with you tonight at Willis's?

**JACK:** I suppose so, if you want to.

**ALGERNON:** Yes, but you must be serious about it. I hate people who are not serious about meals. It is so shallow of them.



And later:

- ALGERNON: ... Now, my dear boy, if we want to get a good table at Willis's, we really must go and dress. Do you know it is nearly seven?
- JACK: Oh! It always is nearly seven.
- ALGERNON: Well, I'm hungry.
- JACK: I never knew you when you weren't....
- ALGERNON: What shall we do after dinner? Go to a theatre?
- JACK: Oh no! I loathe listening.
- ALGERNON: Well, let us go to the Club?
- JACK: Oh, no! I hate talking.
- ALGERNON: Well, we might trot round to the Empire at ten?
- JACK: Oh, no! I can't bear looking at things. It is so silly.
- ALGERNON: Well, what shall we do?
- JACK: Nothing!
- ALGERNON: It is awfully hard work doing nothing. However, I don't mind hard work where there is no definite object of any kind.

Clearly, Algernon's verbal action stands in opposition to Jack's. Algernon's objective is "to relieve his boredom," whereas Jack's objective is "to remain inert." Just as actors must search for contradictions and opposites with their own lines, they must also explore contrasts with other characters. Contrast leads to conflict, and conflict is the heart of drama.

Playwrights make their basic intention clearer and stronger by using contrasting elements. In such cases, the relationship of certain characters' lines to the total meaning is one of contrast with the central theme. The meaning is thus painted more sharply, just as colors appear brighter when contrasted with other colors.

Several examples of the use of contrasting elements appear in *Romeo and Juliet*. Remember that we found its theme to be the triumph of young love over "canker'd hate." Although Romeo and Juliet both meet a tragic death, their love is triumphant. Because of it, the Montagues and the Capulets end their ancient feud, and civil brawls no longer disturb the quiet of Verona's streets.

Triumphant love is expressed throughout the play in Juliet's lines:

My bounty is as boundless as the sea,  
My love is as deep—the more I give to thee  
The more I have, for both are infinite.

and Romeo's:

O my love! my wife!  
Death that has suck'd the honey of thy breath  
Hath had no power yet upon thy beauty.  
Thou art not conquer'd—Beauty's ensign yet  
Is crimson in thy lips and in thy cheeks,  
And Death's pale flag is not advanced there.

The final beauty of their love is moving and memorable because it stands out in relief against the hatred of old Montague and old Capulet, the Nurse's vulgarity, Mercutio's mockery, Tybalt's malice, and Lady Capulet's coldness. The lines of these characters are related to the total meaning through contrast, and it is important that the actors understand this relationship. For instance, Romeo's romantic love seems stronger because it rises above the jibes and cynicism of Mercutio's mocking lines. Tybalt's malicious lines put Romeo's newfound love to a test and bring about the duel that causes Romeo's banishment. Throughout the play, Juliet's warmth and generosity stand out against her mother's unyielding practicality. Lady Capulet rejects Juliet with:

Talk not to me, for I'll not speak a word,  
Do as thou wilt, for I have done with thee.

These particular lines underscore the desperation of Juliet's predicament and propel her toward her final course of action.

Although the Nurse's character is vastly different from that of Lady Capulet, she serves a similar purpose in providing dramatic contrast—her bawdiness against Juliet's sweetness and purity. Her advice to marry the Count Paris for practical reasons, when Juliet is already secretly married to the banished Romeo, is revolting to a person of Juliet's innocence:

I think it best you marry'd with the County.  
O, he's a lovely gentleman!  
Romeo's a dishclout to him. An eagle, madam,  
Hath not so green, so quick, so fair an eye  
As Paris hath. Beshrew my very heart,  
I think you're happy in this second match,  
For it excels your first, or if 't did not  
Your first is dead—or 'twere as good he were,  
As living here and you no use of him.

In such instances, relating the lines to the super-objective means making them provide dramatic contrasts. Knowing when this is so and how various relationships unfold demands a complete understanding of the play as a

## EXERCISE 9.2

### INTERPRETING EACH LINE

Return to the same character you studied in Exercise 8.1 and select a sequence of lines from one unit of action. Study it carefully. For each of your character's lines, determine its

- subtext
- relationship to "your" motivating force
- verbal action
- relationship to the super-objective action

Write out this information to complete your score of physical actions. From here out, this too should be included in your overall analysis.

whole. No individual line can be interpreted without a complete command of the play's global meaning. Even difficult lines yield to honest interpretation after this meaning has been mastered.

## BELIEVING YOUR CHARACTER'S MANNER OF SPEAKING

The lines are composed of two elements, both of which are vital:

- **The content.** What the lines say, including both text and subtext.
- **The form.** The manner in which the content is expressed, including vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and articulation.

We have explored how the actor detects the content of the lines, so we will now consider the problem of believing the manner in which the character speaks. Different speakers may express the same meaning in a variety of ways:

1. I hope it ain't gointa rain an' spoil the picnic we was plannin' fer so long.
2. I trust inclement weather will not mar the outing we have been anticipating for such a time.

These two lines are alike in content, and their surface meanings are identical. The subtext could be the same, and both lines could bear the same relation to the speaker's motivating force. But neither is expressed in a manner that the average actor would find "natural." The actor's problem is to understand the background of the character's speech so she can believe the manner of speaking in the same way she believes in the character's actions.

For the most part, the dramatist imposes the characters' manner of speech by choosing the vocabulary and the grammar, both of which should be accepted as given circumstances by the actor. Occasionally, as a part of the externalization of their characters, actors may introduce variations in pronunciation and articulation. For instance, they might play characters with a dialect, a stammer, or "baby talk." Like all good externalizations, such characteristics should support inner traits and help both the actor and the audience believe them. Baby talk, for example, might be helpful in characterizing a woman who had been pampered by her parents and whose motivating force is to get the same attention from her husband.

Such decisions about the speech of the character are subject to the same intense scrutiny as are other character externals and are justified only if they enable the actor to realize the dramatist's intentions.

Actors study their characters' speech habits in the same way they study other traits provided by the dramatist: They try to find justification for them in the play. They also may need to supply, as they did when justifying actions, imaginary circumstances true to the playwright's conception that help explain why the characters speak the way they do.

If the character's manner of speaking is similar to the actor's, or if he has frequently heard others speak in a similar way, he will have little difficulty. The speech background of Trisha, Meredith, and Frances in *Five Women*

Photo by Karl Hugh. Copyright Utah Shakespearean Festival.



**FIGURE 9.3**

Shelly Gaza as Cordelia in the Utah Shakespearean Festival's 2007 production of *King Lear*. Actors performing in Shakespearean plays must believe the verse and poetic prose language of their characters.

*Wearing the Same Dress*, by Alan Ball, is so immediately comprehensible that it presents no problem to most young American actors. The entire play takes place in Meredith's bedroom, while her sister's wedding reception is in full swing outside. The following dialogue is typical.



- TRISHA: (*Looking at her reflection in the vanity mirror.*) God, would you look at me? I look terrible.
- MEREDITH: You look like a million bucks, as usual.
- TRISHA: I had to put about a gallon of white-out underneath my eyes this morning. (*She pulls a cosmetics bag from her purse and begins to skillfully retouch her make-up....*) So Frances, did you enjoy the wedding?
- FRANCES: Yes, it was so beautiful.
- MEREDITH: It was ridiculous.
- FRANCES: Tracy's dress sure was something.
- MEREDITH: Yeah, it was a float.
- TRISHA: You've got to hand it to her, though, she carried it off. I could never wear anything like that with a straight face.
- MEREDITH: She didn't wear it. It wore *her*. If she has any sense at all, she'll put it on a mannequin and just roll it around the reception and leave herself free to mingle.
- TRISHA: I shudder to think how much that thing cost.
- MEREDITH: Six.
- TRISHA: (*Turns to her.*) That's obscene.
- FRANCES: Six hundred dollars?
- MEREDITH: Six *thousand*.
- TRISHA: She talked me into designing her invitations for *free*, and then she made me go through *eight* revisions, and she spent six thousand dollars on her *dress*? That is totally obscene.<sup>4</sup>
- On the other hand, the speech in Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* presents a problem. Simeon and Peter, both in their thirties, are square-shouldered, homely, bovine men of the earth who live on a New England farm in 1850.
- SIMEON: (*grudgingly*): Purty.
- PETER: Ay-eh.
- SIMEON: (*suddenly*): Eighteen year ago.
- PETER: What?
- SIMEON: Jenn. My woman. She died.
- PETER: I'd fergot.
- SIMEON: I rec'lect—now an' agin. Makes it lonesome. She'd hair long's a hoss' tail—an' yellor like gold!
- PETER: Waal—she's gone.<sup>5</sup>

The average actor will find it difficult to believe this manner of speaking in terms of his own experience. The actor may have no doubt that the speech is right for the character. He may understand the regional factors that have



Photo courtesy of Western Illinois University Visual Production Center. Photo by Larry Dean

**FIGURE 9.4**

A scene from Western Illinois University's production of *Grease*. Directed by Carolyn Blackinton; scene design by Ann Davis; lighting design by Tim Kupka; costume design by Penny Sorenberger. Regional colloquialisms were quite different in the 1950s, and actors in this production must understand the subtleties of language and social mores of the period to make these musical comedy characters fully three-dimensional.

produced this unique, musical language. Still, he is aware that his own speech is quite different, and such a disparity is not always easy to reconcile.

Regional dialect is learned over a lifetime of reinforcement from family and friends. It is a difficult habit to break. Many actors struggle with hearing subtle differences of articulation, vowel placement, and speech rhythms that differ from their own. Their early efforts are often mechanical and imitative. Actors must record and listen to themselves as they try to form the sounds in accordance with the dialogue on the printed page. Some playwrights are remarkably skillful in their use of phonetic spellings to indicate speech variations. Eugene O'Neill was a master of writing dialogue phonetically; George Bernard Shaw also represented Cockney English in this way. Actors, also, may listen to recordings or imitate actual models if they are fortunate enough to know someone whose speech is similar.

If this external approach is to serve its purpose, however, it must lead the actor to believe her character's speech. And believing the speech should, in turn, increase her belief in the characters. In other words, as the actor becomes convinced she has developed a true manner of speaking, she will have a greater conviction in her total characterization. Diction—the way of expressing oneself—is one of the actor's principal resources in creating a character.

Trisha, Meredith, and Frances are average, upper-middle-class young women who speak in a contemporary vernacular. Simeon and Peter, on the other hand, are modest folk who express their thoughts and feelings as best they can, as colorful as their speech often is. As you probably recall, we meet people in *The Importance of Being Earnest* with quite a different background. Algernon Moncrieff is, by his own admission, “immensely overeducated.” He speaks not only to express his ideas but also to impress his hearers with his cleverness and his aptness of phrasing. We have known for some time that speech is an action; now we see that the manner of speaking can carry its own dramatic intention.

All the characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* exhibit a kind of “speech embroidery” indicative of their elegance and earnest artificiality. The following lines of Gwendolen Fairfax are an example. She is talking to Cecily Cardew, whom she has learned is Jack Worthing’s ward. Gwendolen and Jack have recently become engaged.

**GWENDOLEN:** Oh! It is strange he never mentioned to me that he had a ward. How secretive of him! He grows more interesting hourly. I am not sure, however, that the news inspires me with feelings of unmixed delight. (*Rising and going to her.*) I am very fond of you, Cecily; I have liked you ever since I met you! But I am bound to state that now that I know that you are Mr. Worthing’s ward, I cannot help expressing a wish you were—well, just a little older than you seem to be—and not quite so very alluring in appearance. In fact, if I may speak candidly—

**CECILY:** Pray do! I think that whenever one has anything unpleasant to say, one should always be quite candid.

**GWENDOLEN:** Well, to speak with perfect candour, Cecily, I wish that you were fully forty-two, and more than usually plain for your age. Ernest has a strong upright nature. He is the very soul of truth and honor. Disloyalty would be as impossible to him as deception. But even men of the noblest possible moral character are extremely susceptible to the influence of the physical charms of others. Modern, no less than Ancient History, supplies us with many most painful examples of what I refer to. If it were not so, indeed, history would be quite unreadable.

Taking command of these lines will provide quite a test for young American actors. Just learning to “say” them will not be enough. They must understand the ostentation and snobbery that produced such a vocabulary and structure. Only then can they begin to believe the speech and actions of the characters, and they must believe them before they can make an adequate comment on their ridiculousness.

Believing the characters’ manner of speaking is a matter of understanding the influences in their background that have determined their way of speech, of justifying the characters’ speech in terms of their background. The actor is constantly faced with such questions as

- Why does one character have such an extensive vocabulary, whereas another speaks almost entirely in words of one syllable?
- Why does one character speak in long, involved sentences, whereas another speaks in halting fragments?

## EXERCISE 9.3

## STUDYING SPEECH PATTERNS

Choose a character whose manner of speaking varies from your own. Study the speech, and practice the lines until you believe you are truthfully reproducing the character's manner of speaking. If possible, use actual models, sound recordings, or phonetic transcriptions.

- Why does one character speak with faultlessly correct grammar, whereas another says "he don't," "we was," and "I seen"?
- Why does one character say "you gentlemen," whereas another says "you guys"?
- Why does one character say "yeah," whereas another says "ay-eh," and yet another says "yes"?

## MOTIVATING THE LONGER SPEECH

So far in this discussion of interpreting the lines, we have concentrated on the importance of motivation, of relating the lines to the characters' basic desires, and understanding how each line helps the characters get what they want. For the most part, we have been thinking of lines no longer than a sentence or two. Long speeches frequently pose exceptionally difficult problems of interpretation. Usually, the best way to approach them is to break such speeches into small parts, find the subtext of each segment, and relate it to the character's motivating force. In other words, long, complicated speeches should be treated as if they were a series of shorter, more manageable lines. You should avoid the temptation to motivate all speeches as a single idea. Some long, complex speeches may contain several units.

When discovering and arranging the units of a longer speech for performance, remember that each section should have a clearly stated verbal action. In many long speeches, you can easily detect the familiar, classical, three-part structure—the beginning, the middle, and the end. Other speeches may have only two parts, and still others may have five, or seven. You should never divide a speech into so many units that you cannot keep its overall pattern in mind; otherwise, it will seem to the audience to lack structure or form. Sometimes, of course, speeches are broken off, either by the speaker or by another character, before they reach a structural ending.

A speech from *Golden Boy*, by Clifford Odets, will serve as an illustration. Joe Bonaparte, on the eve of his twenty-first birthday, is telling his father he wants to break away from the restraints of home so he may have "wonderful things from life." He thinks he can find what he wants by becoming a prize fighter. But Mr. Bonaparte, a humane and kindly man, wants Joe to find happiness as a violinist and has paid a lot of money for a fine violin that he plans to give Joe for his birthday. Others present in the scene are Frank, Joe's older brother who travels about a good deal, and Mr. Carp, a neighbor who owns an *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.



**MR. BONAPARTE:** Sit down, Joe—resta you'self.

**JOE:** Don't want to sit. Every birthday I ever had I sat around. Now's a time for standing. Poppa, I have to tell you—I don't like myself, past, present, and future. Do you know there are men who have wonderful things from life? Do you think they're better than me? Do you think I like this feeling of no possessions? Of learning about the world from Carp's encyclopedia? Frank don't know what it means—he travels around, sees the world! (*Turning to Frank*) You don't know what it means to sit around here and watch the months go ticking by! Do you think that's a life for a boy my age? Tomorrow's my birthday! I change my life!<sup>6</sup>

Joe's purpose in this speech is to make his father see that he is going to change his way of life and that the change will mean a difference in their relationship. His verbal action is to break away from his home and his father. He is excited and resentful, but the speech does not come easily, and he cannot say it all at once. Once said, he also feels it necessary to defend his decision. Through all this, his relationship with his father creates a psychological obstacle to every verbal action in every unit. The speech may be divided into three structural parts:

1. **JOE:** Don't want to sit. Every birthday I ever had I sat around. Now's a time for standing.  
In this opening, Joe *asserts his independence from his father*.
2. **JOE:** Poppa, I have to tell you—I don't like myself, past, present, and future. Do you know there are men who have wonderful things from life? Do you think they're better than me? Do you think I like this feeling of no possessions? Of learning about the world from Carp's encyclopedia? Frank don't know what it means—he travels around, sees the world! (*Turning to Frank*) You don't know what it means to sit around here and watch the months go ticking by! Do you think that's a life for a boy my age?  
In the middle section, the longest portion of the speech, Joe *defends his decision to break away from his father*. Giving several explanations for his decision, he plays each with increasing intensity.
3. **JOE:** Tomorrow's my birthday! I change my life!  
In the third part, the climactic moment of the speech, Joe *defies his family*.

## EXERCISE 9.4

## PRACTICE MATERIAL FOR LONGER SPEECHES

The following speeches provide material for practice in interpreting lines. Read the play each speech has been selected from because the significance of any speech lies in its relationship to the play. Determine the motivating force of the character. Break the speech into units. Find the verbal actions. Make a score of physical actions. Memorize the speech. As you rehearse it, look for the separate motivation for each unit, and relate its meaning to the objective of the speech as a whole.

If the language is different from your own, study the speech background of the character.

A. Moll in *Kid-Simple*, by Jordan Harrison.

MOLL: I will get you for this, Garth. The world will have to go without new inventions for some time, because all my ingenuity will be directed toward your undoing. I will GET you for messing with my machine and my sanity.... All of CREATION will get you. You will be FOOD. A plane will drop you over the unforgiving Serengeti with a faulty parachute, an empty canteen, no sun block and when one of these circumstances fells you, you will finally do some good on this planet as recycled material. Your meat will invigorate the ecosystem. Your eyes will shrivel into tiny raisins, the albino kind no one favors. And you will be alone, totally alone, for so long that proximity to another body is *novel*. And when you think you'll never see another human face again, I'll swoop in *dues ex machina*, and say simply: 'Sup.... Your stumpy remains are so glad to see me, looking up to me like a God. But instead of kisses or cool clear water I serve you up a subpoena, bringing to the fore your crimes against United States patent law. MAY ALL THIS COME TO PASS. The loneliness most of all.

B. James in *The Boy Who Ate the Moon*, by Jane Martin.

JAMES: Last night I could see my hands in the dark. It suddenly occurred to me that I was going to ignite. I think it must be very painful to burn ... I mean that's different from heat. I would be very afraid to burn ... Remember how they taught you that by rubbing two sticks ... well that's ... my inside rubs against my outside. It was raining last night so I figured it would put me out. I went out ... went out in the rain and down by the Laundromat ... down by Spring Street there was a pool and the moon ... I was pretty sure that if the rain on the outside, the outside of me didn't ... well then I'd just drink the water ... put me out that way ... but I wasn't ... you know ... thinking clearly and I ... and I swallowed the moon. Well just the beginning of one ... part of a moon. It's going to grow inside me ... you know ... for however many days ... making pressure ... making me hotter ... I'm uh ... I'm uh going to leak flame ... I'm pretty sure it will set me on fire ... you know, in my condition ... see the thing is that once you start getting hot it's really hard to cool down.

C. Young Woman in *Night Luster*, by Laura Harrington.

I don't think people see me. I get this feeling sometimes like I'm invisible or something. I can be standing there in a room and I'm talking and everything, and it's like my words aren't getting anywhere and I look down at myself and Jesus, sometimes my body isn't getting anywhere either. It's like I'm standing behind a one-way mirror and I can see the guys and I can hear the guys, but they can't see me and they can't hear me. And

I start to wonder if maybe I'm ugly or something, like maybe I'm some alien species from another planet and I don't speak the language and I look totally weird. But I don't know this, you see, because on this other planet I had this really nice mother who told me I was beautiful and that I had a voice to die for because she loved me so much, not because it was true. And I arrive here on Earth and I'm so filled with her love and her belief in me that I walk around like I'm beautiful and I sing like I have a voice to die for. And because I'm so convinced and so strange and so deluded, people pretend to listen to me—because they're being polite or something—or maybe they're afraid of me. And at first I don't notice because I sing with my eyes closed. But then one day I open my eyes and find out I'm living in this world where nobody sees me and nobody hears me. (*Beat.*) I'm just lookin' for that one guy who's gonna hear me, and see me.

- D. Jake in *The Clawfoot and Hot Tub Interviews*, by Werner Trieschmann.

JAKE: I'm here. In the flesh. I can pull it out myself. Let me lift up this end. No prob. I'm strong that way. I don't go to the doctor. I do not mess with those bloodsuckers. All I own is a box of band-aids and some rubbing alcohol. One time I sliced open my arm on this sheet metal. Got a nasty cut right down to the muscle. My supervisor begged me to go to the emergency room. Instead I went home, had some shots of tequila and sewed it up myself. I'm an independent, do-it-yourself guy. You're like me. Yeah, I've seen you out. I've seen you at Puritan Foods, getting those Soups for One. You bought a hammer there. Was it last week? Yeah. Not the place to buy tools, but I didn't say anything. I've seen you buy feminine stuff at the pharmacy. And those pills, too. I figure Valium or Zoloft. Am I right? No, I'm not *stalkin'* you. I got time on my hands. With the hammer, I figured you were hanging a picture of a boat. One of the catamarans in the Caribbean. I had fun thinking about how you were going to hang that picture and bang your thumb. I thought about how I should be doing it.... You know you got one of the worst houses in Pleasant Acres. Your eaves are a joke. I could hang pictures, install a water heater, re-plaster your walls, re-grout your tub, re-stain your furniture, insulate your attic and weather strip your doorframes. I'd make this house a vault and you won't need to turn on the heater. You could walk naked in the middle of winter. You got a nail that's come up right here (*Showing with his foot.*) and another one here. You've got particleboard under here. I can rip that up and put a layer of underlayment and then a new floor. It'll hold up 'til our grandkids are goin' ape crazy on it. Last for centuries. That's what's missing. Permanence. And me.



E. Spike in *Larry and the Werewolf*, by Jeff Goode.

SPIKE: ... don't give me those eyes, Larry, 'cause it won't work.

I got the patch on the other side, and you know I can't see outta this one. We rehearsed this for weeks, Larry. I worked my ass off for this. All my life this is what I wanted. This was it. This was our big chance. I would kill for this. I'd die for this. I'd die and then come back and kill for this. That's how much I wanted this. That much. Let me finish. I wanted this for myself, I admit it, but I wanted it for you, Larry. For you and for me. For you and me, Larry, for us. That's who I wanted this for, Larry, for us. For both of us. For all of us. (*Beat. She realizes she doesn't want it for Todd.*) Well, for both of us. Larry ... you and me ... we really got something here. Something ... you know ... something ... really ... unspeakable. No, that's not the word. Well, you know what I'm trying to say, Larry. You know 'cause you said it yourself, a million times.... But I guess that was just talk, huh, Larry? What is it with you, Larry? Is it drugs? Gambling? Is it—? Is it—? (*She sobs.*) ... Another woman? (*She begins sobbing uncontrollably.*) I know I got no dibs on you. I know you don't care nothin' about me. But Larry, please, I gotta know. Is that it? If you're gonna rip my heart out, you gotta do it now, Larry, 'cause I can't take any more lies!

F. Young Roy in *No Mercy*, by Constance Congdon

YOUNG ROY: I'm not afraid of tarantulas. I'm really not afraid of anything out here. Two months ago, if I thought I'd be here in New Mexico, well, I would've laughed. I got my orders home in Berlin, and they told us we'd get a month off then go back to, you know, clean up. But when I reported for duty, they put us on this train and the next thing I know, we're heading west. A whole train of soldiers heading west for no reason. Seemed like then. And we stopped in Nebraska—*Nebraska*—for three days and played baseball to kill time. And still we have no idea where we were going or why. And then, and then, back on the train and further west, and the ground starts to change. My buddy wakes me up and presses my face to the window. Lord! There's a herd of antelope galloping alongside the train and I look up and got my breath took away again! Mountains! Blue-green, almost black the pine is so thick. They are so still and big, they look painted on. Well, that's when I knew I was going somewhere important. Something about the speed of that train—I swear once we got close to here, we went faster and faster—I think those guys could've lost control like that. (*Snaps fingers.*) I mean, that prairie blurred into the desert and the day *went by*. And then, bang, we were stopped. Cause we were here. Stopped. Dead. And it was so quiet. The sky was full of stars. And I could feel that train moving inside me for the whole next day. [...] This is just about the most exciting thing



that has ever happened, sir. I mean, I missed the invention of the motor car, I missed Christopher Columbus, I missed the time when Lord Jesus was walking around the earth, I missed the invention, no, *discovery* of electricity. I was beginning to think that absolutely nothing was ever gonna happen to me. You know? When I think that the smartest men, why, in the whole world are here. And all the knowledge that's went into this, from way back there. When the first guy got an idea, like a little light bulb going on over his head, and wham, he invents that light bulb. And then another guy makes it better. And another guy says, "We got a light bulb, we need a socket." And then, wham, we got a socket. And then a lamp. And then, the next thing you know, the whole world is lit up. Lamps everywhere! No more darkness.

G. Arlene in *Getting Out*, by Marsha Norman

ARLENE: This chaplain said I had ... said Arlie was my hateful self and she was hurtin' me and God would find some way to take her away ... and it was God's will so I could be the meek ... the meek, them that's quiet and good and git whatever they want ... I forgit that word ... they git the earth. [...] And that's why I done it. [...] They tol' me ... after I's out an it was all over ... they said it was three whole nights at first, me screamin' to God to come git Arlie and kill her. They give me this medicine an thought I's better ... then that night it happened, the officer was in the dorm doin' count ... an they didn't hear nuthin' but they come back out where I was an I'm standin' there tellin' 'em to come see, real quiet I'm tellin' 'em, but there's all this blood all over my shirt an I got this fork I'm holdin' real tight in my hand ... (*Clenches one hand now, the other hand fumbling with the front of her dress as if she's going to show Ruby*) this fork, they said Doris stole it from the kitchen an give it to me so I'd kill myself and shut up botherin' her ... an there's all these holes all over me where I been stabbin' myself an I'm sayin' Arlie is dead for what she done to me, Arlie is dead and it's God's will ... I didn't scream it, I was jus' sayin' it over and over ... Arlie is dead, Arlie is dead ... they couldn't git that fork outta my hand till ... I woke up in the infirmary an they said I almost died. They said they's glad I didn't. (*Smiling.*) They said did I feel better now an they was real nice, bringing me chocolate puddin'. [...] An then pretty soon, I's well, an officers was sayin' they's seein' such a change in me an givin' me yarn to knit sweaters an how'd I like to have a new skirt to wear an sometimes lettin' me chew gum. They said things ain't never been as clean as when I's doin' the housekeepin' at the dorm. (*So proud.*) An then I got in the honor cottage an nobody was foolin' with me no more or nuthin'. An I didn't git mad like before or nuthin'. I jus' done my work an knit ... an I don't think

about it, what happened, 'cept ... (*Now losing control*) people here keep callin' me Arlie and ... (*Has trouble saying "Arlie"*) I didn't mean to do it, what I done ...

- H. Alen in *The Reeves Tale*, by Don Nigro  
(*Alen is plotting a rendezvous with Sim and Abby's daughter, Molkin.*)

ALLEN: I got it all planned, like a military operation, just like the Bay of Pigs or something. Okay, bad example. Look, we got three beds here, right? Just like the three bears. Now, before Sim hired us, they slept Sim and Abby in the one over on the end, right? [...] They're disoriented, John, because to make room for us, we got Molkin's old bed on the other end, which you and me share, and she's in the near bed with Abby, and Sim's in the middle with Pap. So once Sim gets to snoring good, and Molkin goes to sleep, what does Abby do? She goes out in the kitchen and smokes a cigarette. Every night. Just like clockwork. So when she goes out for her smoke, you follow her out there and keep her busy for half an hour or so, talk to her or something. Hell, screw her on the table if she'll let you. That asshole Sim is driving her nuts. She could probably use a little something to take her mind off her life. You know, you two being so sensitive and all. [...] John, that girl ain't been a flower since she was fourteen. She knows what she's doing, believe me. And Abby don't care. What does she care? Come on, take a chance. You might get lucky. This is America, here. This is like the spirit of free enterprise at work, John. You know what I mean? John? Please?

- I. A young mother in *Vent*, by Sean Patrick Doyle.

YOUNG MOTHER: They are on a campaign against my metabolism. I mean ... it's not like I mind the baklava, but when they bring out the tub of macaroni and cheese, screaming, "Let's fatten you up, hun!" ... my God do the chunks start to rise. I have never seen so much macaroni and cheese in my life. When they scoop it out onto their large plates with little pigs on them ... it makes a noise. It just makes me cringe. Let me tell you. It is like the magnified sound of a moving snail.... but I don't dread that nearly as much as the parade of little fat children. Downing a whole bottle of Hershey's chocolate syrup. Tommy, their four-year old son, calls me "Anorexia." His mother corrects him by saying "Anorexia, honey ... but that isn't nice dear." It's the perfect reflection of what they say about me when I step out of the home, passing over the doormat that says, "Live it Large." And the odd thing is that they get such satisfaction out of when I *do* delve into the Ziplock bag full of cookies. Like they are helping me overcome some health issue. They are taking the kind of credit their doctor will take when he performs a triple bypass surgery on Mrs. Windham. Really.

J. Charlie in *Maggie May*, by Tom O'Brien.

CHARLIE: I mean, you're drinking Budweisers and smoking some cheap-ass, back-of-the-school-bus weed. It gets old. But if you drink the finest imported wines, have steak that melts in your mouth, scotch, cigars, this beautiful Jamaican herb—it is happiness. This is it. They don't want to tell you that. But here it is, my friend. Happiness. They don't know. The people writing the self-help books? The "happiness comes from within" bullshit? They don't got access to this stuff. How would they know happiness when they don't even know what the world has to offer? Do I look unhappy? Do I look like I'm searching for meaning in life? Like I'm looking for a soul mate to spend my golden years with? Fuck off! They all golden years. I'm living a golden life. I beat the fucking system.... Listen to me. Here's the deal, okay. There's all these lives out there just floating around waiting for you to live them. You have all these choices to make. Every choice you make splits things off into another parallel universe that's happening simultaneously to your own pathetic reality.... There's two lives in front of you right this second. A fork in the road, shall we say. Two roads diverged in the yellow wood. Which one you gonna take, bubba, huh? ... Think about it. Most of the time we're too afraid to live. We say, "I couldn't do that. I couldn't be with her. I don't want to be happy." We talk ourselves out of living. But it's still out there. It's waiting for you. It's happening whether you choose it or not. It's just a question of whether you're gonna go for the ride or sit on the sidelines hopin' and dreamin'. All you have to do is step into it. (*Beat.*) A life unlived is not a life at all.

K. Marion in *Abingdon Square*, by Maria Irene Fornes.

MARION: It was he. There was no doubt in my mind. I say him and I knew it was he. [...] I took a book and buried my head in it. I was afraid. I thought if he saw me he would know and I would die. He didn't. I saw him leave. For a moment I was relieved he hadn't seen me and I stayed behind the stacks. But then I was afraid I'd lose him. I went to the front and I watched him walk away through the glass windows. Then, I followed him ... a while ... but then I lost him because I didn't want to get too near him. I went back there each day. To the bookstore and to the place where I had lost him. A few days later I saw him again and I followed him. Each time I saw him I followed him. I stood in corners and in doorways until I saw him pass. Then I followed him. I was cautious but he became aware of me. One day he turned a corner and I hurried behind him. He was there, around the corner, waiting for me. I screamed and he laughed. He grabbed me by the arm. And I ran. I ran desperately. I saw an open entranceway to a basement and I ran in. I hid there till



it was dark. Not till then did I dare come out. When I saw that he wasn't there I came home. I haven't been outside since then. I'll never go out again, not even to the corner. I don't want to see him. I don't want him to see me. I'm ashamed of myself. I'm a worthless person. I don't know how I could have done what I did. I have to do penance.

L. Will in *Gap*, by Carol Lashof.

WILL: I have this dream where I go back to my grade-school playground and I say to the other Black boys: Am I Black enough for you now? Am I? Black enough? ... Kindergarten, first grade, second, third, it was always Sophie Rosen and me at the top of the class and best friends. Math: when the other kids were doing drill-and-kill arithmetic problems, row after row, we got to sit in the hallway with a book of logic games, like figuring out if you told your parents you'd wash the dishes for just a penny on the first day and then double it every day—by the end of week three you'd be making more than \$10,000. Sophie and me, we figured out by the time we were ten, we'd be billionaires. Then we got the giggles trying to decide how we'd spend all that money, and the teacher across the hall got mad about the noise and sent us back to our classroom and complained to Mr. Theodore about letting us be on our own in the hallway. But he kept on letting us anyway, because he was chill. And he liked us, he trusted us—I could tell.... The third-grade spelling bee: down to the wire. Sophie spelled "orangutan." I spelled "Connecticut," remembering the capital "C." We both messed up on "vivacious." She beat me on "rhythm." Ironical, huh? ... This school is so big, if something gets screwed up, you can grow old and die trying to fix it. For instance, last year, in ninth grade, they put me in Algebra I instead of Algebra II—and by the time I got moved to the right class I was way behind and the teacher was pissed off about having to deal with me. He didn't think I belonged there—I could tell.... This year, my classes are mostly so boring I don't see the point of going. No one notices whether I'm there or not anyway. There's a computer that's supposed to call home when you're absent, but mostly I can erase the messages before my parents get home.... I'm 6'2" and I have a buzz cut with "W" shaved into the back. Sometimes I see Sophie crossing the park on the way to school. She always waves and smiles, but her friends, they look at me and they just see "scary." I guess I'm Black enough for them.

M. Victoria in *Victoria Martin: Math Team Queen*, by Kathryn Walat.

VICTORIA: I'm *popular*. Like totally, undisputedly popular. Like, I walk down the hallways, and even though I'm a sophomore, there are seniors—senior *guys*, with deep



voices—who say: *Hey*. Sometimes they say: *Hey, Vickie, what's up?* Like, they know my name.

Ok, so mostly they're on the basketball team so they know my boyfriend, who is totally varsity first string, even though he's only a junior, because this fall while the other guys were playing football all he did was practice his free-throws, because he's a one-sport guy. Scott. He's totally into me. And that's why I'm a *sophomore* and those senior jocks know my *name*, but it's not like I'm one of those slutty girls whose names all the guys know, and plus I totally have girlfriends too.

I'm friends with the *Jens*. Who are on the varsity cheerleading squad, even though they're sophomores, mostly because all the juniors who tried out this year had “weight issues” so forget trying to get *them* up in a pyramid—plus, the Jens are very, very peppy. They know how to do that thing where they toss their ponytails, and depending on the toss, it's either like: *Whatever*, I am so walking away from *you*. Or, it's like: See this swish? That's right, this ponytail says I will see *you* later.

I understand this distinction. I am not a cheerleader. But I *know* this. I have secured my place in the high school universe, after the very volatile freshman year, which the Jens and I refer to as: Versailles. Like, the Treaty of Versailles? You know—World War I, European power struggle, third period history with Mr. Delano—that's where we met, our desks, in a row, across the back of the room: Jen-Me-Jen.

Yesterday at the math meet? All of that was suddenly meaningless. This one kid had an equation of his T-shirt. The quadratic formula, across his back. I *know*! I mean, nerd central, *all* math geeks, *and* I was the only girl. Except for these two on the other team, who would only speak to each other. In binary. For fun. And when I was in the girls' bathroom and I totally just got my period, and had to ask one of them for a pad, they just *giggled*. And so I had to stuff all of this scratchy school-grade toilet paper into my underwear and meanwhile, I almost missed the sophomore round of questions, because they put all the room numbers in Roman numerals. For fun. And when I finally got there, I was sitting up next to this kid, who kept clicking his retainer, and it was driving me crazy, and I was like— (*Suddenly the rest of the team is there. She turns and speaks to them.*) I don't do headgear, OK?

# CHAPTER 10

## Communicating the Subtext

*"The value of words is not in the words themselves but in the subtext they contain."*

**Constanin Stanislavski**

Many actors assume that if they understand the general meaning of a line and have an idea of its overall purpose, they will read the line correctly without further conscious effort. However faulty this assumption may be, it is reasonably understandable that many actors make this mistake when speaking straightforward prose dialogue. But many plays (all classics and a considerable number of contemporary works) are not written in simple prose. They nearly always use a range of rhetorical and poetic devices, and their vocabulary is frequently baffling. In these plays, actors must pay attention to both content and form if they are to communicate the full value of the dialogue to an audience.

Engaging in a comprehensive study of the uses of rhetorical and poetic devices demands much more space and time than we can give it here. We must, however, explore the more common means playwrights use to make their dialogue effective. Understanding these strategies will stimulate you to examine the dramatist's lines more closely. Only by such careful scrutiny can you detect all the subtlety of meaning and aptness of form. Because communication is the actor's primary responsibility and because language is a major means of communication, it goes without saying that successful actors constantly deepen their sensitivity to words and sharpen their ability to communicate their meaning.



Photo by Gerry Goodstein.

**FIGURE 10.1**

Paul Niebanck, Paul Mullins, and John Seidman in The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's production of *Richard III*. Directed by Vivienne Benesch; costume and scenic design by Murell Horton; lighting design by Jane Cox. Actors must communicate the subtext of every line of dialogue and possess a clear understanding of poetic and rhetorical devices; otherwise, communion will be broken with their most important partner, the audience.

## UNDERSTANDING WORDS

Actors must know the meanings of their words! This advice is so obvious that you may resent having it said. Yet it is not uncommon for actors to go into rehearsals not only ignorant of what their lines mean but also ignorant of their ignorance. As an actor, you should own a good standard dictionary—or have immediate access to a computer dictionary—and use it frequently, even looking up words when you think you know the meaning. You also need access to special sources: Dictionaries of slang and colloquial speech are two prominent examples. For almost all period plays, you will also need a glossary and a well-annotated edition of the text.

You need to study such sources conscientiously to discover the meaning of the play's words. Let us return to *Romeo and Juliet* for an illustration. Juliet's first line in the balcony scene (Act II, Scene ii), spoken to herself after she has just met Romeo at the Capulet ball and fallen in love with him, is:

**JULIET:** O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?

Without having a complete understanding of the words, actresses will inevitably misread the line by emphasizing *art* and thus making it mean “Where are you, Romeo?” with some such subtext as “I yearn to know where you are, what you are doing, whether you are longing for me as I am longing for you.” But a simple check of the dictionary will disclose that *wherefore* does not mean “where”; it means “why.” *Wherefore* then becomes the emphatic word, and the correct subtext is “Why do you, whom I have come to love, have to be called Romeo, the son of our great enemy?” This reading leads logically to her next line:

Deny thy father, and refuse thy name;  
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,  
And I'll no longer be a Capulet.

In analyzing the meaning of Juliet's first line, note also the absence of a comma between *thou* and *Romeo*—Romeo is not being addressed. Attention to punctuation helps greatly in finding the meaning of a speech. Incidentally, Juliet uses *wherefore* in the same sense in expressing her alarm after Romeo has revealed his presence in the Capulet orchard:

How cams't thou hither, tell me, and *wherefore*?

She means how did you manage to get in here and why did you come?

Several other usages in the same scene further illustrate the necessity of paying close attention to the meanings of the words. After Juliet has said her famous “that which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet,” she continues:

So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,  
Retain that dear perfection which he *owes*  
Without that title.

A few lines later, fearing Romeo will think she is too forward in declaring her love, she says:

In truth, fair Montague, I am too *fond*.

If your edition of the script has a good glossary, you will discover that *owes* in Shakespeare usually means *owns* and that *fond* usually means *foolish*. Juliet is not saying, “I love you too much,” she is saying, “I am foolish to declare my love to someone I have known only an hour and whose family is an enemy to my family.” This feeling is expressed more fully later in the lines:

I have no joy in this contract tonight:  
It is too rash, too unadvis'd, too sudden;

Words that look familiar but that the dramatist uses with an unfamiliar meaning can be particularly deceiving.

Let us move to a related problem of interpretation. After Juliet has warned Romeo that he will be killed if any of her kinsmen find him in their orchard, he says:

ROMEO: My life were better ended by their hate,  
Than death *prorogued*, wanting of thy love.



The word *prorogued* is not likely to be in the average student's vocabulary. It means "postponed" or "delayed." Romeo is saying, "It is better to be killed at once by your kinsmen than to endure a living death without your love." To make this meaning clear, six words in the line must have some degree of emphasis:

My life were better *ended* by their *hate*,  
Than *death prorogued*, wanting of thy *love*.

Selecting the word or words to emphasize is important when interpreting the lines. The selection is determined by the meaning of the words and by the context in which they are used. We will call these the **operative words**. In this sense, *operative* means "exerting the force necessary to produce an appropriate effect," and we choose this term because it suggests the active influence that certain words have in communicating a meaning. Think of the simple sentence "I gave him the revolver." If we exclude the article, any one of the four words might be operative, depending on the meaning intended. Operative words are not, of course, chosen arbitrarily. Although different actors will make different choices, the choices the actors make should reveal their understanding of the playwright's text and their sensitivity to the uses of language.

Of course, vocabulary needs attention in all plays, not just verse plays from other periods. Actors from one ethnicity, social class, or geographical region may not be immediately familiar with the slang and syntax used by characters from another ethnicity, social class, or region. And most American actors will need help with the meaning of this Cockney dialogue in Edward Bond's *Early Morning*:

**LEN:** We'd bin stood there 'ours, and me guts starts t' rumble. 'Owever, I don't let on. But then she 'as t' say "I ain arf pecky."

**JOYCE:** Thass yer sense a consideration, ain it! I'd 'eard your gut.

**LEN:** I 'ad an empty gut many times, girl. That don't mean I'm on the danger list. But when you starts rabbitin' about bein' pecky I.... You're a rabbitin' ol' git! 'Ear that?

In fact, practically every play demands close examination of its particular idiom. Michael Weller's *Moonchildren* depends heavily on the audience's familiarity with college slang of the 1960s; *Short Eyes*, by Miguel Piñero, makes heavy use of ethnic and prison slang (the term *short eyes* itself is prison slang for a child molester); and one would have to know a whole range of urban or "street" slang to extract nuances of meaning from many of the lines in plays representing that social class.

## HANDLING SENTENCES

An actor who is ignorant of the basic rules of grammar cannot possibly interpret and communicate a playwright's lines. No matter what the role or the play, you must have the ability to recognize subjects and predicates, modifying words, phrases, and clauses, and you must understand the principles of subordination and pronoun reference. Jerzy Grotowski wrote:

The ability to handle sentences is important and necessary in acting. The sentence is an integral unit, emotional and logical, that can be sustained by a single

expiratory and melodic wave. It is a whirlwind concentrated on an epicentrum [focal center] formed by the logical accent or accents. The vowels at this epicentrum should not be shortened but rather prolonged slightly in order to give them a special value, taking good care not to break up the unity of the sentence with unjustified pauses....

In poetry too, the sentence must be considered as a logical and emotional entity to be pronounced in one single respiratory wave. Several lines (one and a half, two, or more) often constitute the sentence.<sup>1</sup>

Understanding the sentence as a structural unit, recognizing the relationship and relative importance of its different parts, determining the operative words (or logical accents as Grotowski called them), and keeping the sentence moving toward its epicentrum is one of your principal areas of concern in dealing with the language of a play. Grotowski's warning against unjustified pauses should be heeded because unnecessary pauses, whether for an intake of breath or for any other reason, obscure the relationship of the parts of the sentence, blurring the meaning, and destroy the rhythmic flow that is essential to the form. Good actors handle sentences so the words are constantly moving forward toward a focal point. The problem can be even more complex than Grotowski suggests. In *The Tempest*, Prospero's "Farewell to His Art" (Act V, Scene i) has a sentence that is seventeen-and-a-half lines long, and Juliet's potion speech (Act IV, Scene iii) has a sentence of eighteen lines. Let's look at some sentences, less complex than those just mentioned, that illustrate this problem.

In *Major Barbara*, by George Bernard Shaw, Lady Britomart answers the protest that she treats her grown-up offspring like children.

**LADY BRITOMART:** I have always made you my companions and friends, and allowed you perfect freedom to do and say whatever you liked, so long as you liked what I could *approve* of.

Here is a sentence of thirty-one words that can be handled as a "single melodic wave," culminating in the operative word *approve*. To select *approve* as the operative word does not mean that other words in the sentence do not have a degree of importance and should not receive some manner of emphasis. But *approve* is a logical choice because in Lady Britomart's mind, her approval is more important than the freedom she claims to allow. It helps reveal her dominating character, and it highlights the comic contradiction of the line by suggesting that she is blameworthy of the very charge she is denying.

The following line from Arthur Kopit's *Indians* presents a similar, but more difficult, problem. John Grass, a young Indian, testifies before a group of senators sent by the president of the United States, the Great Father, to investigate charges of mistreatment. He talks about the futile and bungling attempts of a missionary bishop to help the situation:

**JOHN:** But when we told him we did not wish to be Christians but wished to be like our fathers, and dance the sundance, and fight bravely against the Shawnee and the Crow! And pray to the Great Spirits who made the four winds, and the earth, and made man from the dust of this earth, Bishop Marty *hit* us!

This is a group of fifty-nine words, punctuated as two sentences but constituting a single logical and emotional entity, always moving toward the

operative word *hit*. Grammatically, “Bishop Marty hit us” is the principal clause, and *hit* is the main verb of the entire unit. Logically, it is John Grass’s purpose to impress on the senators the mistreatment the Indians have received, in spite of what (to them, at least) has been a reasonable attitude. Emotionally, he feels very deeply about the physical abuse they have suffered. Kopit’s choice of the word *hit* is peculiarly expressive of John Grass’s uncomplicated earnestness and naïveté.

In *Blues for Mister Charlie*, by James Baldwin, a mature white man tells about his love for a young African-American woman:

MAN: I used to look at her, the way she moved, so beautiful and free, and I’d wonder if at night, when she might be on her way home from someplace, any of those boys at school had said *ugly things* to her.

The speaker realized that at the school they attended, an African-American girl’s permitting any kind of relationship with a Caucasian boy subjected herself to a good deal of cruel comment. In expressing this concern, the whole sentence must move forward to *ugly things*. This speech also affords the actor a chance to observe the principles of subordination, to pick out the main structure, the “skeleton,” and to relate the less important parts to it. Here is the skeleton of this sentence:

I used to look at her ... and I’d wonder if ... any of those boys ... had said ugly things to her.

The other parts must be made subordinate.

## EXERCISE 10.1

## FINDING OPERATIVE WORDS

Select a speech of at least twelve lines spoken by a character in a play on which you are working. Look up all the words (with the exception, perhaps, of articles and conjunctions) to make certain you understand the possible range of meanings of the passage. If necessary, do a prosaic, line-by-line paraphrase—especially if the speech is from a verse play. Find the operative words.

Remember, each sentence may have more than one operative word, but each sentence should be unified into a single structure with its parts related to the whole through the proper use of subordination. Memorize this speech, and rehearse it until you have control of both its meaning and its form.

## BUILDING A PROGRESSION

In the previous section, we stressed the importance of finding the operative words and of directing the rest of the sentence toward them—if not like a whirlwind, as Grotowski suggested, at least in some form of progression. We must feel when actors are speaking that their lines are “going somewhere,” and following this **progression** keeps the audience listening. Even moments of

silence (not to be confused with unnecessary pauses) must drive the dramatic action forward. Actors, like travelers, must keep moving toward some predetermined destination, and they must structure their dialogue with this direction in mind.

Besides the examples already cited, dramatists have other ways of giving direction and forward movement to their lines. The simplest is a series of two or more parts, in which each part receives increasing emphasis as the series progresses. One of the best-known lines in dramatic literature, the beginning of Antony's funeral oration for Julius Caesar (Act III, Scene ii), is such a series:

**ANTONY:** Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears

In Act I, Scene i of *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare uses a similar construction when the Prince of Verona breaks up the street brawl between the Montagues and the Capulets:

**PRINCE:** Rebellious subjects, enemies to peace, Profaners of this neighbour-stained steel—Will they not hear? What ho! you men, you beasts....

In *The Lady's Not for Burning*, by Christopher Fry, Jennet has told how her father, an alchemist, once accidentally turned base metal into gold and how he died trying to rediscover the formula. The cynical Thomas Mendip answers that if he had been successful:

**MENDIP:** ... you  
Would be eulogized, lionized, probably  
Canonized for your divine mishap.

Effective handling of progressions requires looking to the end of the series and building it to a climax.

Playwrights may also use a **ladder device**, in which the idea is “stepped up,” like ascending the rungs of a ladder, by a careful progression of words. Starting at the bottom, one must look to the top rung. In Act V, Scene ii of *Hamlet*, Claudius makes the following toast to Hamlet before the duel he has plotted between Hamlet and Laertes:

**CLAUDIUS:** And let the *kettle* to the *trumpet* speak,  
The *trumpet* to the *cannoneer* without,  
The *cannons* to the *heavens*, the *heavens* to the *earth*:  
“Now the king drinks to Hamlet!”

Hamlet's mother (Act III, Scene iv) is overcome with grief when he makes her aware of her guilty behavior:

**GERTRUDE:** Be thou assur'd, if words be made of *breath*,  
And *breath* of *life*, I have no *life* to *breathe*  
What thou hast said to me.

A delightfully complex example of this device occurs in Act V, Scene ii of *As You Like It* when Rosalind tells Orlando how Celia and Oliver fell in love:

**ROSALIND:** ... For your brother and my sister no sooner *met*, but they *look'd*; no sooner *look'd*, but they *lov'd*; no sooner *lov'd*, but they *sigh'd*; no sooner *sigh'd*, but they ask'd one



another the *reason*; no sooner knew the *reason*, but they sought the *remedy*. And in these degrees have they made a pair of stairs to marriage, which they will *climb incontinent*, or else *be incontinent* before marriage.

Another way dramatists “progress” the lines is by piling, one on top of another, details that accumulate to create a total effect. This is called a **periodic structure**. Here, the term *periodic* means “consisting of a series of repeated stages,” which well describes this method. The repeated stages build to a climax, with no trailing subordinate elements afterward to minimize their effectiveness. Again, this structure is easily recognized when read silently but requires careful handling when spoken. From the very beginning, the actor must look forward to the end and keep moving toward it. Shakespeare often used periodic structure; a classic example is John of Gaunt’s soaring description of England in Act II, Scene i of *Richard II*:

**JOHN:** This royal throne of kings, this scept’red isle,  
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,  
This other Eden, demiparadise,  
This fortress built by Nature for herself  
Against infection and the hand of war,  
This happy breed of men, this little world,  
This precious stone set in a silver sea,  
Which serves it in the office of a wall  
Or as a moat defensive to a house  
Against the envy of less happier lands;  
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this  
England....

This great speech actually contains several more “stages” before the final climax. Speaking it well is a strong challenge for even the finest actor, but practicing it will prepare you to deliver simpler instances of this structure with ease.

And prepare you must because all good playwrights use periodic structure, although not always so formally as the ringing example from *Richard II*. Sean O’Casey uses it in *Juno and the Paycock*, when Mrs. Madigan describes how “her man” used to court her:

**MRS. MADIGAN:** “That’ll scratch your lovely, little white neck,” says he, ketchin’ hould of a danglin’ bramble branch, holdin’ clusters of the loveliest flowers you ever seen, an’ breakin’ it off, so that his arm fell, accidental like, roun’ me waist, an’ as I felt it tightenin’, an tightenin’, an tightenin’, I thought me buzzom was every minute goin’ to burst out into a roysterin’ song about “The little green leaves that were shakin’ on the threes, The gallivantin’ buttherflies, an’ buzzin’ o’ the bees!”

Arthur Kopit uses this same type of periodic structure for building a progression in *Indians* when Wild Bill Hickok is standing over the beautiful Teskanjavila:

**HICKOK:** Hickok, fastest shooter in the West, ’cept for Billy the Kid, who ain’t as accurate; Hickok, deadliest shooter in the West, ’cept for Doc Holliday, who wields a sawed-off shotgun, which ain’t fair; Hickok, shootinest shooter in the West, ’cept for Jesse James, who’s absolutely indiscriminate; this Hickok, strong as an eagle, tall as a

mountain, swift as the wind, fierce as a rattle-snake—a legend in his own time, or any other—this Hickok stands now above an Indian maiden....

It is interesting to note how, for comic effect, Kopit has Teskanjavila ruin the climax of Hickok's splendid speech, forcing him to weaken the periodic structure by adding subordinate elements:

**TESKANJAVILA:** I'm not an Indian and I'm not a maiden!

**HICKOK:** Who's not an Indian and not a maiden, but looks pretty good anyhow....

## THINKING ANTITHETICALLY

"Suit the action to the word, the word to the action." Particularly with the plays of William Shakespeare, you must look for **antitheses**. As Shakespeare also wrote in *Richard II*, "... set the word itself against the word...." "We can easily overlook it because we don't use antithesis very much today, particularly in our everyday speech," said John Barton, Associate Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, in his book *Playing Shakespeare*. "Yet Shakespeare was deeply imbued with the sense of it. He *thought* antithetically. It was the way his sentences over and over found their shape and their meaning.... 'Antithesis' is in a way a bad word for something very practical. It sounds obscure and learned."

Perhaps it would simply be better to use Shakespeare's description and set one word or phrase against another. This is yet another of the actor's paradoxes. Although you must constantly build your progressions toward culminating points, you must also refer to what has already been said. Every word must either *qualify* what has preceded it or change the direction of the action. "If we don't set up one word," added Barton, "we won't prepare for another to qualify it. And if the next word doesn't build on the first and move the sentence on, both the audience and the actor may lose their way." In this manner, we think antithetically. Actors frequently do not understand antithetical construction and consequently choose to "operate" on a word or phrase that has already been emphasized, rather than finding the antithesis that will advance the idea. Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" is a simple antithetical phrase. However, the operative words found in the next sentence are less clear.

**HAMLET:** Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them?

*Sea of troubles* refers back to and, in this case, is synonymous with *outrageous fortune*. The operative words that carry the idea forward thus are *take arms*.

Portia's famous mercy speech in *The Merchant of Venice* begins with an antithetical phrase. After all legal recourses to save Antonio's life have been fruitless, she declares that Shylock must be merciful. But he retorts with:

**SHYLOCK:** On what compulsion must I? tell me that.

Photo by Kenneth L. Stilson



## FIGURE 10.2

Scott Hamann as Feste in Southeast Missouri State University's production of *Twelfth Night*. Directed by Robert W. Dillon, Jr.; costume design by Deana Luetkenhaus; scenic and lighting design by Jeffrey Luetkenhaus. Shakespearean actors must have the ability to think antithetically and to clearly communicate mental images through verse and poetic prose.

And Portia answers:

**PORTIA:** The quality of mercy is not strained,  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath....

*Strained* means *forced* or *compelled* and is used antithetically against Shylock's *compulsion*. If an actor does not use the antithetical phrasing to clarify the subtext, the audience will not follow the progression. The use of antithesis

looks backward; however, it is a primary means of driving the dramatic action forward.

Contrasting two words or phrases or emphasizing the possibility of two or more alternatives is another means of speaking antithetically. When you recognize this device in a line, it is almost impossible to read it without correctly emphasizing each of the different terms or alternatives. This mode of expression is apparent in such well-known sayings as “It is more blessed to *give* than to *receive*” or by the double-contrast in “To *err* is *human*; to *forgive*, *divine*.”

Although the preceding examples might suggest that antithetical phrasing is merely a Shakespearean or classic device, the truth is quite the opposite. Our language may lack the eloquence of Shakespeare, but today’s speech and thought patterns parallel those of Elizabethan England. Here are additional contemporary examples to further clarify this point.

*If you believe in yourself, others will believe in you too.*

*I’ll admit what I did if you admit what you did.*

*I wish you died in that wreck instead of her!*

*He’s going to kill himself, and there’s nothing you can do about it.*

*She wants to do it herself. She doesn’t need our help.*

MAN: C’mon, we’re gettin’ outta here.

WOMAN: I ain’t goin’ nowhere.

KID: Wait! (*Catching up.*) But you’re my hero.

PLAYER: (*Stops. Turns.*) Maybe you need to *rethink your heroes*, kid.

In the following argument between two parents, almost every line is pitted antithetically against the previously line.

MOTHER: I wanna know who told him such nonsense. Did you do this?

FATHER: Why don’t you ask him?

MOTHER: He’s just a boy.

FATHER: He’s a grown man. Have you looked at him lately?

MOTHER: I see him every day.

FATHER: Well, you obviously need glasses.

MOTHER: He stays parked in front of that Wii, 24-7.

FATHER: And that’s my fault?

MOTHER: He needs your help.

FATHER: He hates my guts.

MOTHER: He idolizes you!

## SHARING IMAGERY

In Chapter 7, we discussed the technique of relating to images or pictures that actors supply from their imagination. Playwrights also make extensive use of images in their dialogue, and communicating these images to the audience





Photo by Curtis Hart.

**FIGURE 10.3**

A scene from the University of Memphis Department of Theatre and Dance's production of *Hay Fever*. Directed by Bob Hetherington; costume design by Janice Benning Lacek; lighting design by John McFadden; scenic design by David Galloway. The eyes are the mirror of the soul, and truthful imagery shows itself most vividly through the eyes of the actor.

through the dramatist's words is one of the actor's major tasks in handling language. "The exchange of impressions through images is our basic language: at the moment when one man expresses an image at that same instant the other man meets him in belief," wrote Peter Brook in his seminal book, *The Empty Space*. "The shared association is the language—if the association evokes nothing in the second person, if there is no instance of shared illusion, there is no exchange.... The vividness and the fullness of this momentary illusion depends on his [the speaker's] conviction and skill."

In *Sound and Sense*, Laurence Perrine defined imagery as "the representation through language of sense experience." And, of course, sensory experience

is one of the pleasures derived from going to the theatre. Perrine goes on to explain, “The word *image* perhaps most often suggests a mental picture, something seen in the mind’s eye—and visual imagery is the most frequently occurring kind.... But an image may also represent a sound; a smell; a taste; a tactile experience, such as hardness, wetness, or cold; an internal sensation, such as hunger, thirst, or nausea; or movement or tension in the muscles or joints.”

Images are either *literal* or *figurative*, although they both serve the same purpose of providing a vivid sensory experience. A figurative image expresses something in terms ordinarily used for expressing something else; thus, some comparison is either stated or implied. A literal image is a direct description couched in terms intended to stimulate a sensory response. “The russet dawn colors the eastern sky” and “She talks about her secret as she sleeps upon her pillow” are literal images. But in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, Shakespeare says in figurative language:

**HORATIO:** But look, the morn in russet mantle clad,  
Walks o’er the dew of yon high eastward hill,

**DOCTOR:** ... infected minds  
To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets.

The terminology relating to imagery can be very complex; indeed, more than 200 kinds of figurative speech have been identified. It is neither necessary nor desirable for you to become entangled in such subtlety. It is essential, however, that for both literal and figurative images, you appreciate the sensory experience the playwright is expressing. For figurative language, you must also understand the aptness of the comparison. Most important of all, you must respond to imagery with all your senses before you can communicate it to an audience. Sam Shepard’s description in *Red Cross* of swimming in the rain provides a rich example:

**JIM:** ... Your body stays warm inside. It’s just the outside that gets wet. It’s really neat. I mean you can dive under water and hold your breath. You stay under for about five minutes. You stay down there and there’s nothing but water all around you. Nothing but marine life. You stay down as long as you can until your lungs start to ache. They feel like they’re going to burst open. Then just at the point where you can’t stand it any more you force yourself to the top. You explode out of the water gasping for air, and all this rain hits you in the face. You ought to try it.

Shakespeare created exquisite images. Consider this example from *Macbeth*:

**ANGUS:** Now does he feel  
His secret murders sticking on his hands.

In *King Lear*:

**LEAR:** Thou art a bile,  
A plague-sore, an embossed carbuncle,  
In my corrupted blood.

Imagery has particular power to affect the emotions of both the actor and his audience. Consider Constance's moving lament for her lost son in *The Life and Death of King John*:

**CONSTANCE:** Grief fills the room up of my absent child,  
Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,  
Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words,  
Remembers me of all his gracious parts,  
Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form.

Imagery can be beautiful, as in Romeo's rhapsody when he first sees Juliet:

**ROMEO:** O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright.  
It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night  
As a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear.

It can be folksy, as in O'Casey's *The Shadow of a Gunman*:



**FIGURE 10.4**

Shannon Boland in a scene from Missouri State University's production of *Urinetown*. Directed by James Woodland; costume design by Kristina May; lighting design by Darren Levin; scenic design by Robert Little. Set in the thriving days of Bohemian Alphabet City, under the shadow of the AIDS epidemic, the strong visual and inner images in this scene have a powerful effect on the audience.

MRS. HENDERSON: I'm afraid he'll never make a fortune out of what he's sellin'.... Every time he comes to our place I buy a package o' hairpins from him to give him a little encouragement. I 'clare to God I have as many pins now as ud make a wire mattress for a double bed.

It can be earthy, as in Davis's *Purlie Victorious*:

OL' CAP'N: You don't know, boy, what a strong stomach it takes to stomach you. Just look at you sitting there—all slopped over like something the horses dropped; steam, stink and all!

## EXERCISE 10.2

### PRACTICE MATERIAL: IMAGES AND SUBTEXT IN CONTEMPORARY PLAYS

Work on several of the following speeches, exploring the language and using it fully to communicate the words, images, and overall meaning.

- A. Cora Jane Gearheart in *Split Britches*, by Peggy Shaw, Deborah Margolin, and Lois Weaver.

CORA: I always sit by that window. And I look out and I ask Blanche questions and she tells me. I say Blanche who's that over there and she tells me. And I say what's so-and-so doin' over there and she tells me that. But this one time ... I was lookin' out that window and there was a man lookin' in at me ... and he was smilin' at me. He wanted to kiss me. Well I didn't want nobody to think nothin' bad about me, Emma, so I went away from that window and I didn't go back.

Until the next day I went back. And he had come there in the night to kiss me. And he wanted people to know he had come there to kiss me because he left his footprints in the snow all the way from the road right up to that window. He wanted to give me a bad reputation. Well I didn't want nobody to think nothin' bad about me, so I put on my coat and I put on Blanche's boots and I went out there and stepped on them footprints ... all over them footprints ... a thousand footprints all over his footprints. I didn't want nobody to know he had come there in the night to kiss me. I didn't want nobody to think I had a bad reputation.

- B. Augustus in *The Darker Face of the Earth*, by Rita Dove.

Once there was a preacher slave  
went by the name of Isaac.  
When God called him  
he was a boy, out hunting ricebirds.  
Killing ricebirds is easy—  
just pinch off their heads....  
but one day, halfway up the tree  
where a nest of babies chirped,  
a voice called out: "Don't do it, Isaac."  
It was an angel, shining  
in the crook of a branch.  
Massa let him preach.  
What harm could it do? ...



Then a slave uprising in Virginia had all the white folks  
 watching their own niggers  
 for signs of treachery.  
 No more prayer meetings, Isaac!  
 But God would not wait,  
 so Isaac kept on preaching  
 at night, in the woods.  
 Of course, he was caught.  
 Three of his congregation  
 were shot on the spot, three others branded  
 and their feet pierced.  
 But what to do about Isaac,  
 gentle Isaac who had turned traitor?

First they flogged him. Then  
 they pickled the wounds with salt water,  
 and when they were nearly healed,  
 he was flogged again, and the wounds  
 pickled again, and on and on for weeks  
 while Massa sold off Isaac's children  
 one by one. They took him to see his wife on the auction block,  
 baby at her breast.  
 A week later it was his turn.  
 His back had finally healed;  
 but as his new owner led him  
 from the auction block,  
 Isaac dropped down dead.

They couldn't break his spirit,  
 so they broke his heart.

C. Megan in *Rights Wronged*, by Roger Nieboer.

MEGAN: All I ate for breakfast was some Doritos and a Diet Cherry Coke and I wasn't feeling so great anyways. And I was already late for first period cuz I missed the bus, so I ran. Had to run all the way and by the time I got there it's already second period so I go to the office. Big Judy sends me to Bio Lab. Go directly to Bio Lab. Do not pass GO, do not collect two hundred dollars. Lab door's open. I sneak in. The teacher has a big plastic pail up there on the front table. He pops it open and this smell ... this uggy-wamp, funeral parlor, odor of death permeates the entire supply of atmospheric oxygen. I'm thinking to myself, this is it: Gag City. The Big Barferoo. The teacher reaches into the bucket and goes, "Class, today we do frogs." And I go, "Whadya mean 'do'?" And he goes, "Dissection. We are going to begin the dissection of our frogs." And I go, "Whadya mean 'dissect'?" And he goes, "The systematic removal of tissues, organs, and ..." And I go, "I can't." And he goes, "Why not?" And I'm all ... "Well ... I'm a vegetarian." And he goes, "Young lady, I'm not asking you to eat the frog, but merely to observe its anatomical structure." And I go, "Can't I observe its anatomical structure without chopping it up into amphibian sushi?"

D. Taylor in *Hand Jive*, by Lew Holton.

TAYLOR: Once, when I was a kid—twelve, thirteen, somewhere around there—I was checkin' out the closets. It was around Christmas; I was snoopin'. And I found this box of stuff. Old stuff from the war—medals, papers, stuff like that.... You know, he never told me exactly what happened to his arm. He just said an airplane blew up and he got hurt. Never sat down and told me the whole story. And once I found out, I never told him I knew.... In the box, there were these ribbons and pins, and two separate boxes—like jewelry boxes. One box had his Purple Heart; the other held a Navy Cross. I didn't know then what a big deal that was. Later, one summer when I was home from college, I looked around and found that box again. That time I looked through the papers and found the citation that went with the Cross. That's how I found out what happened.

It was the last few months of the war. He was aboard a destroyer in the Sea of Japan. They were attacked by Japanese planes. He shot down this ... no. No, he didn't just "shoot down" a plane—he SAVED an entire ship. (*Short laugh.*) An entire ship! Right now, there's this humongous gray Navy ship floating around out there someplace 'cause my Dad saved it. (*Short pause.*) I hope that's not one of those "after-life" questions ... like from St. Peter or somebody ... (*In St. Peter's voice, whatever that sounds like.*) "What did you save, Andy?" (*Snapping to attention, saluting with his left hand, and answering as ANDY.*) "One United States Navy destroyer and countless American sailors, sir! (*As St. Peter again.*) "Excellent! And you, Taylor?" (*As himself.*) Ummm ... some old baseball cards?

E. Jade in *Poodle with Guitar and Dark Glasses*, by Liz Duffy Adams.

JADE: I was abandoned in a museum and raised by kindly museum guards. So you see I'm pretty much at home with art. We used to make the rounds at night and I'd look at the art by flashlight. I have a fierce grasp of detail. It's the bigger picture I have trouble with. My earliest art memories are of the bottoms of paintings, the lower edges. Because I was little you know. I didn't understand what the signatures were for a long time. I couldn't read yet. I thought they were art too. I didn't quite get that people make art. I think I thought art was a natural phenomenon. Like I thought that the statues of gods in the classical wing were petrified people, people who were under a witch's spell or something. There was one I had a wicked crush on. One of those beautiful curly-haired athletes, lean marble body, sad empty eyes staring into the distance. Once at night I snuck out by myself with a flashlight, and climbed up onto his plinth, twining my tiny limbs around him, under the influence of some idiotic fairy tale. I kissed his cold, cold lips. No magical transformation. (*Slight pause.*) Life is so fucking disappointing. (*Slight pause.*) I don't know why I'm even talking to you. What does a photographer know about anything? Running around

plagiarizing life and calling it art. Aaagh. Don't mind me. I'm just in a nasty funk 'cause I've been abandoned by my god.

F. Dali in *Lobster Alice*, by Kira Obolensky.

DALI: ... We begin at the edge of the world. Luminescent, phosphorescent, fluorescent, tumescent! The edge of the world looks like the cliffs of Dover. A watch running out of time. A drain sucking a sinkful of water. The edge of the world. Stand on it and you will find yourself near the edge of death. Or life. A young girl about to be an old woman. We are, each of us, the culmination of every instant, every part of our life, from the past to the future. And, I might add, it's a moment I personally adore. When beauty flares for one brief fling before settling into something ordinary. My heroine.

We first see her in a field, picking strange daisies as big as trees. She is oblivious to the eyes that gaze upon her. Eyes as large as the world. Eyes in the daisies. Eyes in her own eyes. Chronos, the god of Time. Time looks like a blank watch, a portrait of a dead person, ice, a beautiful boy. He will be her lover. What would you do if you stared Time in the eyes? What will she do when she stares into his eyes, which are like pearls and chocolate.

She sees him first in the flowers, and then in the sky. And perhaps someplace more ordinary. A swimming pool.

First there is an introduction.

And then there is a seduction.

Seduction is a red cape.

You Tempt Me.

Seduction is a crevasse, wet with sweat.

Seduction is easy when Chronos is in the bed.

The second movement is very seductive. I see a plethora of creatures, each more fantastic than the last. I want floozies and flotsam, daggers spitting out of the mouth of a tiger. Nipples like mountains, climbed by a kiss. A woman sodomized by her own chastity. A puddle of lust. A puddle of pride. A puddle from Paris. A puddle of puddles, each filled with desire. The heroine of my story, I'd call her Alice only that would upset you. The heroine of my story and Chronos unite. They make monsters together. The monster of shame. Shame is a woman with a mustache and a cake on her head. The monster of lust, a wet seal. The monster of youth, which looks like a watch. Water rushing down a drain. A beautiful boy. The lust, shame and youth leak into the world, in a chaos of umbrellas shaking themselves of excrement. And there is rain. The sound of ripping paper.

You Tempt Me

And You Tempt Me.

And You Tempt Me.

There is blood. Perhaps.

There are tears

Which wash the earth clean.

And dissolve the story.

Leaving traces on the screen and in the memory. Of all that we search for. All that we love. The sad sounds of violins. (*A beat. Dali spent, throws himself again on the couch.*) Magnificent. That was magnificent.

G. Angie in *Patter for the Floating Lady*, by Steve Martin.

ANGIE: ... I loved you. So many things. The safety. The words exchanged. Letters. I would cough and the phone would ring and it would be you asking me if I was all right. You could imitate me and make me laugh. You would buy me a little thing. When I made spaghetti for you, you were so grateful, Pavarotti himself couldn't have made better spaghetti. We were at a restaurant and a woman came up to you, flirting and right there in front of her, you laced your fingers between mine, showing her who you loved. But the most powerful was the tennis shoe. My God, I cried. After our week in the tropics—where we collapsed, ended—a month later, not having spoken, you sent me a tennis shoe. I looked at it for days, not knowing why you sent it. Then one morning, barefoot, not knowing why, I slipped my foot into it. Sand. Grains of sand still in it from seven thousand miles away; each one the size of a memory. I will love you forever for that second. I cried. I cried for us. But when we fell apart, you didn't understand that I would be back. That if you let me have my life, I would be with you forever. Now, I see other people.

H. Thomas in *Freak of Nature*, by Robert Alexander.

DUMAS: Where I'm from, the air is red, the trees grow upside down, under the ground. Dirt is blue, the ocean orange. The fish live in the ground, and birds don't have wings. They fly backwards, upside down, at the speed of light. Potatoes fall from the sky when it rains. And the people—we cry only when we're happy, and we cry when we make love. And we make love with our minds, as we send out waves of pleasure and passion in quiet rays of fire and heat to the people we love. We copulate from the center of our brains. We can do it standing up in a crowded room, or laying down at the bottom of a pool. If you let me—if you can trust me, if you will allow me to turn your clock forward about a hundred thousand years, then you will experience an orgasm so intense, you will feel yourself levitate—your whole world will vibrate. Your toes will curl. Butter will come out of your pores. Your eyelids will flip back. The sun will burn through the trees as the light brightens your face and you will soak me inside of your syrup and you will drink me into your pores, and I will ejaculate you with a pleasure so profound, we will both rise from the ground, as I drink up all your fears and catch all your tears. Inside our pleasure dome, I will mold you and hold you, as our love between the sheets, ends the war in the streets. Are you ready to come to that special place?



I. Becca in *The Face in the Mirror*, by Phil Zwerling.

BECCA: I saw her. I saw a old witch. Ugly. She was uglier than you ... and that's ugly. I seen death. I ain't scared of you or Big Donna. I seen death in her eyes. I seen death. In the mirror. The cracked one in the shitter. She was there! Lookin' out at us. Lil' Shirley hit the bag first and I held her when she lay back. I could hear you all startin' to make noise in here but it was nice and peaceful where we was. Then I look up. The mirror was cloudy. Like smoke, you know? At first I couldn't make anything out. Then this face ... this ugly face ... grew in the mirror. She was alive, I could see by her skin, and she was crying, but her eyes was dead ... like a fish after you cut off the head. (A *beat*.) But, it wasn't no fish ... Her hair was long and messed up like she didn't have no comb and the wind had blew it all around and she didn't care. Her clothes was black. Black shirt, black dress, black robe. Black everything ... and long, black fingernails, but her skin was white, really white. She didn't say nothing, but I knew she came because tomorrow's the Day of the Dead, and she's looking for her children. Her dead children. She came to take me ... or Lil' Shirley ... or both of us. (*Thinking*.) She was crying, though. Crying and sad ... (*Beat*.) and dead.

J. True in *Act a Lady*, by Jordan Harrison.

TRUE: Back in the merchant marines, I remember a fella who put two coconuts on his chest and called that a lady. Entered himself in the cadet talent show, strummed on a banjo missing a string and sang "*Under the mango tree....*" He didn't look pretty, no, far from, with a big mouth drawn on like the south sea natives, it weren't half pretty. But I remember everybody leaned forward in their chairs, like they watched it sorta *different* because of how he looked. Guess it had the interest of something uncommon. Like a magnet—it's hard to explain. He put on those two coconuts and suddenly everyone with their eyes bigger than if he were a hundred-percent lady swishing in that grass skirt. I got no problem wearing a dress, 'less it pinches. I just don't know if I call it *art*. I know: what right I got to judge? I tan I'm a tanner I tan things I tan. But one time my partner Knox and I stuffed two otters right outta the Stick River and mounted them like you couldn't hardly tell they weren't alive. Like we put the life back in them 'cause of how we posed them. Nobody could say that wasn't something to see. I guess I never thoughta myself as something to see. But if that Zina wants a tanner for a Countess, I'll do my best to make 'em lean forward.

K. Julie in *Spine*, by Jessie McCormack.

JULIE: ... I was eight years old and my father started giving me an allowance. Twenty bucks a week. Even at the time I remember thinking, "Why is Dad giving me so much money? It's not appropriate for a child my age." And then on top of that he

always made me carry an extra fifty-dollar bill around. That was “mug money.”

See, homeless men would often prey upon little kids walking home from private school so in the event that I ever got mugged, my father wanted to make sure I always had enough cash on me. That way my attacker wouldn’t get mad and seek retribution somehow.

So every morning before school my father would yell from the den: “Don’t spend your ‘mug money.’” And this eventually took its toll on me. I started walking around in complete fear that I was gonna get mugged all the time—in the playground, during “snack time,” wherever I was, and then I started fixating on the idea that fifty dollars wasn’t enough money to satisfy a person who went to all the trouble of attacking me so then I started saving up my allowance and using it as supplemental “mug money” until I wound up walking around with like six hundred dollars on my person.

And then one day it happened. I was walking down Riverside Drive and this man came up to me and demanded I give him all my money. And he became completely shocked when he saw how much I had on me. He kept asking what a kid my age was doing, carrying around that much cash. And then he started making fun of my wallet. It was one of those tiny, plastic “Hello Kitty” wallets with the Velcro flap, and he kept saying if I was gonna carry so many bills then I oughta get a big leather wallet, a real “*man’s* wallet,” not this flimsy, little, “pussy” wallet I was using. And I didn’t know what he meant by that so I said, “It’s not a ‘Little Pussy’ wallet, it’s a ‘Hello Kitty’ wallet.” And he laughed. I made my assailant laugh. I remember taking some sort of strange pride in that even though I didn’t understand what he was laughing about.

Then he said if I told anyone about this he would come find me. And that was it. I looked away and he was gone. I did eventually tell my father and all he did was berate me for walking down Riverside Drive. “Always take West End, there are more door men around.” After that I wasn’t so afraid of getting mugged anymore. The fear just kinda disappeared. I did get a new wallet, though.

- L. Frankie in *Communicating Through the Sunset*, by Kerri Kochanski.

FRANKIE: There were these tadpoles. These tadpoles in my backyard. I’d sit for hours and watch as they’d swim in this pond where I’d built up my rock garden. I loved these things ... And it wasn’t because they could swim fast. They couldn’t. They were slow and wobbly. Morphing every day. Growing arms. One leg—they were ugly. Ugliest creatures I’ve ever seen!

Now spiders, maggots—I’ve seen them up close. Gross. Even for a guy. But the thing is, how did they get like—I mean, what was God thinking? To create organisms so

completely— (*He takes a moment, as he is completely blown away.*) It's like the speed of light. Or black holes. Mind boggling ... But even more—because they're completely real. So thrilling to think—but how can we let ourselves? I mean, if we did ... Well, there would be no need to think of anything else. Watches would stop! Buildings would cease being built! So awed by their significance—

So we forget their importance. Forget their importance, in order to survive. To move along. Spend our lives in shallow actions prompted by shallow thoughts—(*Coming to understand.*) — which we *cling* to in order to cover up our awareness of what is most interesting—And why ...? Because that's what we as humans do ... We as humans don't think. We go along ... Miss Fitch ... You know, she tells us butterflies are beautiful, and so we pin them on the wall ... Well, I wouldn't pin a butterfly, any more than I'd pin a ladybug. Or a bee. I mean, what have they done ... Nothing like tadpoles ... Nothing like you, Rachel. Nothing like me. (*He turns to her.*) You've got this ugly thing about you ... But just because there's something ugly ... some scary thing like one arm or one leg—over which you have no control —because that's the way it was destined to grow because that's the way life took it—Well, just because you have that deformity, it doesn't mean you're not wanted ... not by someone who can see that deformity for what it is ... Tadpoles ... You know, I loved 'em so much I actually wanted to *be* one ... but aside from reincarnation, I knew I was never gonna get the chance ... So I did the next best thing. I ate 'em.

And it wasn't because I was freaky. And it wasn't because I was strange.

I just honestly love tadpoles.

M. Lisette in *The Trophy Room*, by Hilly Hicks, Jr.

LISETTE: I loved Lewis! I trusted him. (*Beat.*) I loved him so much, when I found out I was gon' be a mother, I wasn't even scared. I was happy. I was smiling and singing to myself. I wasn't worried at all. I went in my bedroom and locked the door. And I sat up in front of the mirror and took off my blouse. Took off my skirt. And I stared at myself, looking for the spot where I was gonna get big. I rubbed my hand over it. And over it. And over it. 'Til I thought I could feel my little baby in there ... (*Beat.*) I wasn't gon' tell my mama about it. I was just gonna leave and not get her mad. But I wanted Lewis to come with me. I thought we were in love enough to be a family, so I asked him to come with me. (*A pause.*) But he didn't want the baby. He wanted me to give it up. "I wanna live a little more life, Lisette." I told him how happy the baby made me, but he didn't want anything to do with it. 'Cause he wanted to live a little more life. So I told my mama. I told her I was in trouble ... And she told me to leave ...

# CHAPTER 11

## Transforming into Character

*"Success is transient, evanescent. The real passion lies in the poignant acquisition of knowledge about all the shading and subtleties of the creative secrets."*

**Constantin Stanislavski**

Ultimately, you are working toward the complete incarnation of a new human being, a piece of art you have created using the text and given circumstances, along with your personal history and imagination. To reach your onstage goal, you must fully experience every aspect of your imaginary person. You must believe in the power of "if." You must have complete faith in the world of the play (or film), just as you must accept your character's every action as true. From the beginning of the rehearsal process, you must "transform" yourself into the life of another human being, a gradual progression Stanislavski referred to as **reincarnation**.

Just as real life evolves over an extended period of time, the mystery of inspiration behind a secondary onstage life does not occur in a single burst. The psychology of the human soul is too deep and too complex to comprehend in a solitary moment. One of the primary purposes of this book has been to help you develop a logical rehearsal and performance method that helps you move away from yourself and into the physical body and mental consciousness of your character.

The average academic rehearsal period for a **straight play** is approximately six weeks; it's eight to ten weeks for a musical or a classical play written in verse. Because the complete transformation from self into your character usually takes the entire rehearsal period, you should not concern yourself with reincarnation. After you have done your script analysis, it is





Photo by Karl Hugh. Copyright Utah Shakespearean Festival.

### FIGURE 11.1

Brian Vaughn (*left*) as Lance and Jake as Crab in the Utah Shakespearean Festival's 2008 production of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Reincarnation, the transformation from self into the self of the character, is a gradual process that begins with your first reading of the script and lasts through your final performance.

incumbent upon you as an actor to remain in the present while onstage. To do this, you must focus on “your” immediate circumstances—“your” relationships, moment before, simple objectives, tactical decisions, and adjustments to obstacles. Only by concentrating on the moment-by-moment existence of your character can you become one with him—subordinating yourself to “your” thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Only then can the reincarnation from self into the self of your character take place.<sup>1</sup>

Your transformation into character begins in earnest the moment you see your name on the **cast list**. You have a specific role. The homework process began prior to auditions, but now it intensifies. It is your responsibility to fully engage in a thorough analysis of the script while researching your character. However, it is also time for you to begin rehearsals. Only now do you have the advantage of working under the guidance of a director. A good director, who has also thoroughly analyzed the script and who has fashioned a strong artistic vision, helps you shape your analysis and character transformation so it will make the greatest possible contribution to the overall production. The director helps you create a character that is true to the dramatist's intention and according to her interpretation for that particular production.

The director's interpretation becomes the foundation for the master plan—a map often intricately complicated in its detail—for coordinating all aspects of the production into an artistic whole. Your specific transformation into character is a vital part of that plan, and much rehearsal time is spent on its development and its relationship to the other characters in the play. You must also learn how to use all the elements of modern theatre to reinforce your character, including lights, scenery, costumes, sound, and many more. You must learn to maintain your composure in a demanding and often pressure-packed group enterprise. Producing a play is a fine example of cooperative effort—a process described by Harold Clurman in *The Fervent Years* as “the relating of a number of talents to a single meaning.”

There are many specific types of rehearsals—**reading, blocking, working, run-through, cue-to-cue, technical, technical run-through, and dress**—but for the actor, five principal overlapping phases always make up the overall rehearsal process.

1. Finding the meaning
2. Developing your character
3. Creating and refining the form
4. Making technical adjustments
5. Polishing for performance

## FINDING THE MEANING

For a production to realize its possibilities and be the “relating of a number of talents to a single meaning,” everyone working on the production must understand what that single meaning is. And everyone must understand how each particular part, small or large as it may be, contributes to the expression of it. The final success or failure of the production will rest in all likelihood on that part of the rehearsal period devoted to finding the meaning of the play.

Production teams depend on the director initially to possess a more thorough knowledge of the play than anyone else and to share her vision with the team at the first meeting. The various production personnel take the director's interpretation and superimpose their own ideas before taking them back to the director, who usually incorporates all or part of each artist's contribution into the artistic whole. Usually, the schedule calls for a number of reading rehearsals, in which actors sit in a circle reading aloud their individual parts and discussing the play with the director and with each other. Other members of the production team will often be invited to these sessions. Remember, however, you must always guard against sharing too much personal information about your character with the entire group. Again, recall our comments in Chapter 8 about mystery and secrets.

The important thing is that everyone should clearly understand what the play means. Until this common understanding has been reached, the group is

likely to be working at cross-purposes, and the rehearsals cannot proceed effectively.

After the interpretation is set, you begin to search for your character's motivating force and its relationship to the super-objective. Here again, agreement between you and the director is necessary, and the reading rehearsals usually produce this understanding. At the same time, you begin to consider the problem of line interpretation—of relating the lines to the character's motivating force and to the meaning of the play as a whole.

There are two schools of thought with regard to the amount of table work. Some contemporary directors sit around a table with their cast and read and discuss the play for as much as a third of the entire rehearsal period, a practice Stanislavski used at the beginning of the twentieth century at the Moscow Art Theatre. He eventually realized—and most contemporary directors agree—that too much table work actually impedes the psychophysical process. Actors must learn “to act,” not just discuss. Through actions, you are forced to consider the psychological motivation, thus finding a harmony between substance and shape. So, as we previously suggested, you must learn to analyze the script in juxtaposition with the physical exploration that occurs in rehearsals. The process of physical and psychological exploration is never finished, as new and deeper meanings are certain to reveal themselves during all kinds of rehearsals and, indeed, during performances.

Although the director and actors are teammates, sharing the goal of excellence, they have different responsibilities. The director is the team captain, who ultimately decides which particular actions move the play toward the desired effect. The director also interacts with other team members—set designer, lighting designer, costume designer, property master—and, most of all, with the playwright, either directly or through the play. A play is not just an imitation of an action but is also a work of art requiring unity, structure, and focus—all of which a director must create. The director guides you in much the same way an acting teacher guides an acting class by supervising the production: inspiring your own analysis, growth, and development, and serving as a formal friend.

College actors sometimes expect directors to give them too much direction. You are a creator. In addition to transforming into your role, showing up at rehearsals, and adapting to different directorial methods and to your fellow actors, you should be self-reliant. Self-observation is an important part of artistic growth. Actors who refuse to look objectively at their own work are destined to a life in community theatre. When asked to review their performance, they either say such things as “Fabulous,” or “Great” or else blame their lackluster work on the audience. Actors who cannot—or will not—articulate “what worked” and “what didn't work” will never grow. Actors who will not take responsibility for their own work will forever remain amateurs. As Uta Hagen wrote in *A Challenge for the Actor*, “the actors will cease to improve in their parts unless they themselves have learned to recognize their flaws and how to correct them.” As a young professional actor, you must understand that the





Photo by Kenneth L. Stilson

## FIGURE 11.2

Chelsea Serocke (*left*), Andrew Tebo, and Cody Heuer in a scene from Southeast Missouri State University's production of *The 1940s Radio Hour*. Directed by Dennis Courtney; costume design by Rhonda Weller-Stilson; lighting design by Philip Nacy; scenic design by Jeffrey Luetkenhaus. Style is the director's unique overall interpretation of the dramatist's script. Every aspect of production—including the acting—must be unified and must define the style.

director is there to guide you through the process, but you must have the ability to explore, make decisions, and evaluate your own work.

## DEVELOPING YOUR CHARACTER

With the meaning of the play in mind, you are ready to concentrate on characterization. At this time, most actors find their greatest satisfaction as creative artists, and, as we have seen, the temptation is great to rush to this phase before the proper groundwork has been established. In this series of rehearsals, you explore your inner resources to discover how you can use your experiences to understand the problems of the character. You use your imagination to supply additional circumstances to round out the character's background and to aid yourself in believing the action. You observe people and objects to find helpful details. You continue to read, study paintings,



and listen to music if you need to enlarge your experience to understand any aspect of the play.

By this time, you have completed the task of breaking your role down into units of action. You know the simple objective of each unit and can relate it to the character's motivating force. You devise a score of physical actions through which you can realize your objectives, and you explore various "tactics" for working against obstacles in each unit, both at home by yourself and at rehearsals with the other actors.

At the same time, you are determining the motivation behind each line, discovering its subtext and verbal action, and relating it to the character's motivating force. If the character's speech differs from your own, you have the added task of learning to reproduce it believably by listening to speakers with a similar background or to recordings.

Chances are that you will be called on during these rehearsals to have completed the memorization of your lines and cues. As with the amount of table work, there are two schools of thought with regard to memorization of lines. Some directors warn against memorizing the lines before you know your subtext and have your inner monologues and inner images. They feel that if you memorize the lines too early, your intonations may be entirely wrong. They believe that after you have done the necessary preparation, the lines will follow easily. Other directors, however, demand that you memorize the lines from the beginning. Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko debated this issue. Today, Russian directors agree with Nemirovich-Danchenko. "Before an actor can understand and make a dramatist's language, style and unique diction his own, the lines must first be memorized," wrote Sonia Moore in *Stanislavski Revealed*. "Even if an actor understands a character's actions and motivations, without the text he will not be able to understand fully the subtext or its relationship to the text." Both arguments are valid, and chances are you will develop a technique that falls somewhere in the middle. Regardless, you must take this responsibility seriously and complete it by the time you are asked to be "off book," a moment that varies from director to director.

Accurate memorization is your responsibility. You owe it to the dramatist, who is dependent on you for the truthful representation of the work, and you owe it to your fellow players, whose own lines must be motivated by what has gone before.

## CREATING AND REFINING THE FORM

Yevgeny Vakhtangov, director of the Moscow Art Theatre's First Studio, used to say that "Art is search, not finished form." In the early stages of blocking rehearsals, you are exploring the character, inventing the **business**, creating the form. However, throughout the investigative process—a process that doesn't fully conclude until the lights fade on the final performance—you are refining the form. The period of first discovery is undoubtedly the most exciting part of the creative process, and at some point, you will be asked to **freeze** your major movements. However, you must *never* allow your

investigation of form to end. As long as you can improve, make new discoveries, enhance the second plan, and uncover better actions and tactics, the artistic development of your character will continue. You are not bound by your early discoveries. Theatrical form is never “set in stone.” Through self-observation, you continue the *process of exploration*, for that is the entire purpose of rehearsals—no matter how close to opening night.

Using the technique discussed in this book, your work will never grow stale. However, if your verbal and physical actions become nothing more than mechanical repetition, your performance is dead. And it will grow worse with every subsequent presentation. The moment you stop working, the truthfulness of your actions and subsequent emotions will become mere accidents. Art will only exist as long as there is exploration of outer form. Stanislavski referred to it as the state of “I am.” He said, “Right here. Right now. Today.” At every rehearsal, you must, as your character, relive the moments of action as if they were happening for the first time. You must continually ask yourself, “What would I do *if* I were this character in this circumstance?” What are “my” actions? What is “my” objective? What are “my” expectations? What am “I” willing to do to get what “I” want? What adaptations am “I” willing to explore?

You must play your objectives and work against your obstacles each time you put on your character’s clothing. This is your path to uncovering the “mystery of inspiration.” With the proper inner work at every rehearsal and performance, your work will remain fresh. Your character will continue to grow. Inspiration comes as a result of hard work! And repeated inspiration comes as a result of even harder work! That is the way it is—no matter how great your talent.

In the early working rehearsals, the initial creation of form is a rewarding, and sometimes agonizing, process. Again, transformation—the process of reincarnation—does not spring full-blown from the director’s or your imagination; rather, it grows slowly. It comes in bits and pieces and cannot be forced. Although parts of it may need to be “grafted on from the outside,” as Stanislavski said in his supplement to *Creating a Role*, it cannot be wholly imposed in this fashion. It comes from the combined imaginations of you and the director, stimulated initially by the playwright and later by the responses of the actors to one another and to the products of other artists—props, settings, costumes, and lights, for example. It must develop organically as the character develops. Form grows out of character and character out of form, so, enigmatic as it sounds, what a character is determines what she does, and what she does determines what she is.

Most of the time, the ground plan determines the actor’s large movements (entrances and exits, crosses from one area to another). The director and designers determine these before rehearsals begin, aware that the most important consideration in making the ground plan is the movement it imposes on the actors. The large movements become apparent as soon as the ground plan is explained, and the actors accept these new conditions and motivate them. In fact, the blocking, the ground plan, the director’s concept, the scenic design, the costume design, the prop design, and the



Photo courtesy of the USC School of Theatre.

### FIGURE 11.3

Miriam Glover (*left*) and Reynaldo Pacheco in a scene from the University of Southern California School of Theatre's production of Marivaux's *The Dispute*. Directed by David Bridel; costume design by Sara Fox; lighting design by Leigh Allen; scenic design by Don Llewellyn. Throughout rehearsals and performances of this satirical comedy about man's never-ending exploration of love and infidelity, the actors in this scene continue to experiment with form.

lighting design all join the playwright's words as part of the actor's given circumstances.

Some movements and other physical activities are inherent in the lines. Examples are crossing to answer the doorbell or telephone, serving tea, or less obvious indications, such as Petruchio's threat to Katherina (*The Taming of the Shrew*): "I swear I'll cuff you, if you strike again" or Juliet's plea to Romeo: "Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day." Most acting editions of plays also describe physicalization in their stage directions, but you must examine this material carefully.

In all likelihood, the printed instructions will relate to a ground plan and set of circumstances entirely different from those of the current production, and the director often may tell you to ignore them entirely. Even including all these sources, it is necessary to invent additional movement and physical activity, relying on your impulses. Remember that physical objectives help



you believe in your character and express his desires in ways the audience can see and understand. During working rehearsals, you and the director use your imaginations to devise movement and business that will give outer form to inner characterization.

You also use these rehearsals as a testing ground for what externals of manner, dress, action, and so forth you can use to reinforce the characterization. These externals are vital because, as discussed in earlier chapters, doing is believing. You are likely to believe the character to the extent you can translate the character's desires into action. Such small things as using a handkerchief, eating a sandwich, turning on a light, or writing down an address provide physical motivations on which you can concentrate your attention.

Determining the amount and nature of the physical activity is a matter to be settled between you and the director. Good directors frequently make suggestions, but you have both the opportunity and the responsibility to originate small actions that help create form. Nowhere is the quality of your imagination more evident than in this phase of your work. Of course, to claim the stage, all business must be justified in terms of the total meaning of the play and the production.

Costumes and properties are vastly important in creating the form of both the role and the production. If you establish a proper relationship to them, they become in themselves excellent "actors," and they are essential to the creation of physical image. "A costume or an object appropriate to a stage figure ceases to be a simple material thing, it acquires a kind of sanctity for an actor," wrote Stanislavski. "You can tell a true artist by his attitudes towards his costume and properties."

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## EXERCISE 11.1

### PUTTING SPONTANEITY INTO PHYSICAL CHOICES

"I don't know what to do with my hands." This is a common frustration felt by many young actors. The fact is that even seasoned veterans sometimes do not know how to divorce themselves from their own habitual actions when creating a distinctly new human being. Real life is impulsive, unplanned, and spontaneous. Our words stem from thought, whether predetermined or stream-of-consciousness. If we are wise, we think *before* we speak. More often than not, however, we think *as* we speak—often sticking our proverbial feet in our mouths. Our dialects and manners of speech are subconsciously determined by a lifetime of habits. The same holds true with our physical gestures and movements. We simply do not think about these things.

Onstage, unless you are working improvisationally, a playwright determines your character's words. As an actor, it is your job to make these words your own, to communicate them as *if* they are original thought demanded by the circumstances. However, you must say your lines exactly as written. Onstage physical actions, on the other hand, are completely spontaneous, determined by your



interpretation of the text, your character, “your” emotional relationships, the given circumstances of the production, and your imagination. As in life, every onstage physical action has the potential for spontaneity, and yet for many actors, physical spontaneity is beyond their reach.

The following exercises force actors to move away from words and into their bodies without thought. Every moment onstage, your body must be truthfully animated. The self-conscious actor gets “in his own head,” causing excess tension, hindering the instinctual ability to make natural and creative physical choices.

- A. With the entire group standing in a circle, focus on your actions. No thinking. Just doing. Your instructor selects one person to present a spontaneous action that includes both sound and movement. Keep it short, no longer than two seconds. Making eye contact with someone else in the group, the focus of this action is directed at that person, who then imitates the given action and sound without thought. Once complete, that person instantly makes eye contact with someone else in the group and performs a new action and sound, passing the energy to him. The sequence continues until everyone has participated at least once.
- B. This time, going around the circle, each actor presents an original physical action while saying his own name. After completing the circle, the instructor selects one person to deliver his original physical action and name to someone else in the group. That person repeats exactly what is given to her (the other person’s name and physical action), then delivers her own name and original physical action to someone else. This continues until everyone has participated at least once. This reinforces physical spontaneity without forgetting lines.
- C. Now working opposite a scene partner using a memorized sequence of lines from a play that you are rehearsing, one actor presents a specific yet meaningless motion using her entire body as she speaks her first line of dialogue. During her lines, the listening actor imitates his partner’s physical motions as she speaks and moves. Once she has completed her lines and movement, he responds with his next memorized line while presenting specific yet meaningless motion. The exercise, which forces both partners to invent and react to spontaneity, continues until instructed to stop.
- D. Again, work off your same scene partner with the same memorized sequence of lines. Rather than imitating your partner’s physical motions as she speaks, now react—without imitating—with your own physical movement while she speaks her lines. Then present your own specific yet meaningless motion as you speak with your partner reacting—without imitating—with her own physical movement. Thus, all movement is original.

- E. With the same partner and memorized sequence of lines, all movement, whether speaking or listening, should be original, but now it should aid your communication of the subtext. Although both actors are moving throughout the exercise, all motion has purpose.
- F. Once both partners have conquered the previous exercise, they should now present the scene without speaking—movement only. The scene should not break down to a game of charades, but the sequence is communicated through a logical succession of physical gestures and movements.

This sequence of exercises is an excellent classroom tool or an effective means of making physical choices at the beginning of a rehearsal period. They force you to remain in the state of “I am,” while exercising your power of physical communication and creativity so that you no longer have to wonder, “What do I do with my hands?”

## MAKING TECHNICAL ADJUSTMENTS

As you enter the run-through rehearsals, you begin to work in the setting, with the properties that will be used in performance, in costume, and under the lights. At this time, adjustments are always necessary. The furniture may take up more space than the small chairs and tables with which you have been working. Opening and closing actual doors may require more time than you have been allowing. The position of a piano may have to be changed to improve the sight lines for the audience. Manipulating the clothing may require more care than anticipated. A climactic scene may have to be played farther downstage so that it may be lighted effectively. Such adjustments are an inevitable part of rehearsal. Experienced actors recognize the need for these changes and immediately find ways (sometimes by inventing additional “circumstances”) to motivate them in terms of their characters’ desires.

During technical rehearsals, certain actions may have to be repeated over and over to allow the lighting and sound crews to coordinate their timing with that of the actors. You are responsible for handling these painstaking rehearsals calmly and pleasantly. Although it may seem that the development of the production has come to a standstill or actually regressed, you must remember that you have now had many weeks of rehearsals and that the technical production crews are attempting to catch up in one or two nights. You must recognize that the technical crew will catch up quickly. Also be aware that only through these rehearsals can the entire company become the smoothly working team it will take to make the production a success.

## POLISHING FOR PERFORMANCE

The final technical run-through rehearsals, including the dress rehearsals, are devoted to polishing for performance. At this time, your blocking is set—although your work continues—and feelings of tentativeness must disappear. During the earlier rehearsals, you have made many discoveries. You have

experimented with details of business, movement, and line reading. Throughout the entire period, you have explored details that allow you to believe in your character. These rehearsals are, in fact, a continual process of selection and rejection. By the time the play is ready for polishing, however, your major choices must be relatively firm. During the final rehearsals, you need to have confidence in your characterization and in the technical support for the production, because only then can you be comfortable and assured in your performance.

Much attention in run-through rehearsals turns to timing and **projection**, although both will have been anticipated earlier. Timing is a matter of pace and rhythm, pertaining to the tempo at which lines are spoken and business and movement are executed and to the rapidity with which cues are picked up. As long as you feel uncertain about the details of your performance, you cannot establish and maintain a tempo.

A sense of timing is one of the subtlest elements of stage technique. For its development, you must have experience before an audience. Too slow a tempo does not hold interest, but too fast a tempo obscures the meaning. Too consistent a tempo becomes monotonous, whereas too varied a tempo seems jerky and illogical. If you are slow to pick up cues, the play's tempo will falter between speeches. If you are too fast in speaking your lines, their meaning will be blurred. To the expert ear, this blurring clearly indicates that you are not using your lines to accomplish a verbal action. Maintaining too constant a tempo indicates you are not hearing and feeling different tempo-rhythms for varying structural units.

An important consideration in timing is the use of *silences*. Many beginning actors tend to *pause*—an indication that “nothing” is happening—for their own convenience (because they are not breathing correctly, they are not thinking fast enough, or they are not sure of what they are doing), without regard to dramatic effect. During silences, however, dramatic action is still being driven forward. Objectives are still being pursued. Nevertheless, silences should be used sparingly and *only* when they are more effective than speech.

Some playwrights are so conscious of the need to use silences effectively that they take great pains to indicate the proper place for them in their scripts. Actors performing in the plays of Harold Pinter, for example, will find silences to be as much a part of the dialogue as the words themselves.

Timing varies from play to play, from scene to scene, from character to character, and from audience to audience. Thought-provoking plays usually require a slower tempo than does farce, and expository scenes at the beginning almost always require a slower tempo than do climactic scenes at the end. One character moves and speaks more slowly than another, and one audience is quicker at grasping meanings than another. During the final rehearsals, the director guides the cast in establishing effective tempos for the play, for different scenes, and for different characters. The actors alone have the responsibility to feel out the audience and make necessary adjustments from performance to performance.

Vocal projection is another variable element. An ongoing requirement of the theatre is that the audience must hear and understand the lines. This requirement may be satisfied by a variety of voice levels, ranging from a



shout to a whisper. Projection does not mean talking loudly but describes the actor's effort to share every moment of the play with the audience. The play, the scene, the character, and the size and acoustical qualities of the auditorium determine the degree of loudness that is most suitable. Again, variety is necessary. Nothing is more tiresome than listening to an unvaried voice over a period of time. Unmotivated, abrupt changes, on the other hand, are likely to startle the audience and attract undue attention.

Visual projection is equally important. The audience members must see the action as clearly as they can hear the lines. Three requirements of movement, business, and gesture are listed here:

1. They must be suitable to the character, the scene, the play, and the general style of the production.
2. They must be clearly seen.
3. Their significance to the total meaning must be readily comprehensible.

At final rehearsals, actors turn much of their attention to auditory and visual projection. The director carefully checks their effectiveness, but the final test can be made only by performing before an audience. To ensure that the cast passes the test on opening night, producers and directors have preview performances or invite an audience to the final run-throughs.

## WORKING AT REHEARSALS

For a talented actor, well trained in techniques of her art, rehearsals are a happy time, although they are not always filled with fun. Preparing a play for production is at best hard work, often fraught with frustration. But during rehearsals, you have the greatest opportunity for creative accomplishment. You should begin rehearsals resolved to use all of your resources for the good of the production. What is best for the production should be the single criterion for decisions, and nothing makes for a happier atmosphere than sharing this resolve with all members of the cast.

Rehearsals proceed best if you establish a relationship with the director and with the other actors based on mutual respect. The director determines the working methods, the rehearsal schedule, and the distribution of rehearsal time among the different acts and scenes. You respect both the method and the schedule and cooperate with the director in his way of working. Needless to say, you attend rehearsals regularly and punctually. You are ready to work at the scheduled time, which means you arrive fifteen to thirty minutes early, warm up, and prepare for your first scene. You have an obligation to keep yourself healthy, rested, and in good spirits, so sickness, fatigue, or personal problems do not interfere. To the other actors, you are generous and demanding: insisting that they give their best, generous in giving your best to them.

At the first opportunity, you also want to get to know the stage manager, to understand her importance to the production and to respect her authority. Although her specific duties vary from theatre to theatre and company to company, the stage manager is the person in charge of both rehearsals and performances, making certain things run smoothly and on time, both onstage





Photo by Kenneth L. Stilson

**FIGURE 11.4**

Rance Wright directs Chelsea Serocke in a rehearsal of Southeast Missouri State University's *Senior Showcase 2010*.

and backstage. Establishing the proper relationship with this individual is absolutely critical to a productive rehearsal and performance period.

Throughout each rehearsal, you are alert and committed to the work at hand. You give your entire attention to what is going on, both when you are in a scene and when you are waiting for an entrance. You mark directions in your script or in a notebook. After blocking or business has been given by or worked out in conjunction with the director at rehearsal, you are responsible for retaining it. You bring a supply of pencils (with erasers) to rehearsal with you and record all movements in the margin of your script at the time you are blocked, using standard abbreviations. Drawing diagrams in the margin is a practical way of recording complicated blocking. You must do more, however, than keep track of your blocking. You write down your units, objectives, subtext, comments, and interpretations until your copy of the script becomes a complete score for playing your role. That score becomes an invaluable source of reference during later rehearsals and performances. You take careful notes on your director's oral critiques and refer to them before the next time you rehearse the particular scene. You study, absorb, experiment, probe, watch, listen, and create.

Rehearsals constitute a fluid process during which the production gradually emerges. For you, the actor, the process offers a chance to explore every facet of the character you are portraying. Layer by layer, the process of reincarnation occurs, and you relate your character to the performances of the rest of the company and the production as a whole. You recognize that early rehearsals must progress in bits and pieces; therefore, you are wary of going too fast. Each moment of the play must be explored and any problems solved through trial and error. Early decisions can only be tentative; preliminary ideas about a character may actually be reversed as rehearsals progress. The production must develop organically. Without change at each rehearsal, satisfactory progress toward the final shape of the production bogs down.

Rehearsal expectations vary from company to company, but the work habits of all good actors reflect an attitude toward the theatre that is conducive to creativity and free from serious “acting traps” that shackle their efforts. What are these traps? Joseph Slowik has pinpointed four on which Grotowski regularly concentrated while Slowik was observing his company. They are *impatience*, *half-heartedness*, *poor work ethics*, and *substitution*.<sup>2</sup>

Impatience leads to a lack of technique because it causes you to look for shortcuts that disrupt and emasculate your work. Stanislavski called this trap taking the “line of least resistance” in creating a character. The impatient actor relies on tricks, on work that has been successful in a previous characterization, or on actions that have been neither sufficiently grounded in the play’s given circumstances nor properly articulated with the other actors’ performances.

Half-heartedness means giving less than maximum effort during rehearsals. Good actors simply do not work with anything less than their entire being. They know that truth and believability are difficult to achieve under any circumstances and that without maximum effort they simply will not appear.

Poor work ethics inevitably lead to a rehearsal atmosphere in which creativity cannot take place, in which actors are afraid to take a chance. Sure signs of poor work ethics are resentment, backbiting, buck passing, and unconstructive criticism, all mortal enemies of the trust necessary for success in the theatre.

Substitution is the most pervasive trap of all but also the most difficult to define. “Anything less than [a] precious recognizable human response is a substitute,” said Slowik. “It is something behind which the actor hides when he is empty.” For example, an actor may substitute real tears with the artificial act of burying her face in her hands. This will undoubtedly appear as a false indication. However, “When audiences seem to be satisfied with less than the ‘real thing’ actors continue to hide behind substitution, building their careers on one of the most destructive enemies of creativity.”<sup>3</sup>

## PLAYING THE PART

We have seen that your first major concern during rehearsals is discovering the total meaning of the play by studying the script, examining other sources, and discussing the interpretation with the director and the other actors. When



Photo by Chris Richards

**FIGURE 11.5**

A scene from the University of Arizona School of Theatre Arts' production of *Love's Labour's Lost*. Directed by Brent Gibbs; costume design by Lisa Marie Eckman; lighting design by Daniel O'Brien; scenic design by Katie Alvord. After the show opens, actors must be able to repeat an inspired portrayal at every subsequent performance. Note the joy on the faces of these ladies.

working with the kind of play that constitutes the great body of Western drama, both classic and contemporary—the kind of play in which the dramatist expresses his meaning by creating characters involved in some sort of conflict—you must next give immediate attention to understanding the character you are playing and to believing the character's speech and actions. In later rehearsals, you become increasingly concerned with projecting the character to the audience, and you continue to focus on these concerns during the entire run of the play. You must bring the character newly to life at every

performance, confident that you are not only performing “natural” actions but also creating a theatrically effective form.

As the play is repeated in performance, the core—the super-objective, motivating forces, simple objectives, and overall physical form of the production—stays the same. Keeping it the same is one of your responsibilities. You are required to perform the play as rehearsed, and the Actors’ Equity Association fines and ultimately suspends professionals who fail to respect their obligation. As explained, however, this requirement does not mean that creativity (and exploration) ceases and that the robot-like actor repeats from memory what has been “frozen” in rehearsal. Rather, you commit yourself at each performance to accomplishing the character’s objectives and to establishing relations with objects and other actors as if it were for the first time. Performance demands continual and fresh adjustment to the stage life going on around you. To keep a performance the same, it must always be subtly different; mechanical repetition does not retain vitality.

*Concentration* is the key to success, but you must recall the earlier lesson in Chapter 6, in which we concluded that concentration must take place on two levels. Let us review this important, if sometimes confusing, duality.

On one level, you direct your attention to satisfying the desires of the character. You use your speech and actions to get what the character wants and attempts, and to influence the behavior of the other characters as you try to satisfy your objective. By concentrating on this objective, you are able to believe your actions. They, in turn, produce feelings similar to the feelings the character would have if the situations were real. Your imagination also allows you to use the feelings that arise from your relationship to the other actors.

On another level, you concentrate on expressing the character in theatrical terms. The audience must hear the lines and see the actions. A tempo must be maintained that is suitable to the play, stimulating to the audience, and dramatically effective. You do your part to create enough variety in the performance to ensure a continual renewal of the audience’s interest. To maintain this level of concentration, you must develop what Lynn Fontanne called an “outside eye and ear” to guide you in playing your role. You have the dual function of being both character and interpreter.

In some contemporary works, the creation of character in imaginary circumstances is a minimal part of your responsibility. You express your or the playwright’s meaning to the audience in your own person. In these instances, the audience becomes a part of the given circumstances of the play, and your task is to find every way possible to communicate with them directly, clearly, and forcefully.

Perform your function with ease and authority. The audience experiences no pleasure watching a performer who is tense and strained and no comfort watching one who does not seem confident in his ability to perform with some degree of credit to himself. Concentration, again, is the keynote to relaxation. When you can turn your full attention to doing a job you know you are prepared to do, you forget your fears and your self-consciousness.



Although many of the suggestions we have made about performing a role are universal, conditions certainly vary with the experience of the company, the sophistication of the audience, and whether the play is presented for a limited run, for a long run, or in repertory. These distinctions are too complex for inclusion in this text, but you should be prepared to seek advice from your instructor, your director, your stage manager, or a colleague who has experienced the specific conditions under which you will be performing. Keeping a role fresh during a long run is a particularly difficult problem that will tax your ability to generate exciting objectives and actions anew every time you step onstage. Naturally, each audience must believe you are performing the role for the first time and, for them, you are. Any reasonably accomplished actor can get excited about opening night; it is the 5th, or 75th, or 375th performance of the same role that taxes your technique.

One of the final tasks the actor must learn is to handle **criticism**, both positive and negative. Although it would be foolish to say you should pay no attention to criticism from the press or your friends, it is important for you to establish the habit of acting for your fellow actors and your director rather than for the critics. Negative criticism is depressing and inevitably affects a show adversely. Praise or flattery usually adds fuel to the fires of self-esteem, a conflagration from which your enemies all too often emerge. Acting is a frightening art, the only one in which the moment of its final creation is also the moment of its acceptance or rejection by the public. Actors often suffer because the audience, on whom they are dependent for their success, does not seem to view their art with the same respect they have for other artists. “More than in the other performing arts, the lack of respect for acting seems to spring from the fact that every layman considers himself a valid critic,” explained Uta Hagen in *Respect for Acting*. “While no lay audience discusses the bowing arm or stroke of the violinist or the palette or brush technique of the painter, or the tension which may create a poor *entrechat*, they will all be willing to give formulas to the actor.... And the actor listens to them, compounding the felonious notion that no craft or skill or art is needed in acting.”

This book has been dedicated with the purpose of helping you believe in your craft, your skill, and your art. *Believe* is the operative word, the linchpin, of its message. Without a believable foundation for character—believable actions; believable objectives; believable vocal, physical, and emotional technique; and above all, a belief in the script and one’s fellow artists—you are doomed to failure. With them, you have a chance to create magic, to move an audience to a deeper understanding of the mystery and the majesty—as well as the failures and the foibles—of humankind.

# CHAPTER 12

## Preparing Undirected Scene Study

*"It is no use wanting to be 'the best'—you must do your 'own best.' Value only your opinion of your acting, and that of a few trusted people."*

**Uta Hagen**

Throughout this textbook, we have explored acting as a truthful human experience. Rather than approaching the work of the actor as a process of generating pretense and behavior based loosely on human truth, we have insisted that you embrace real experiences while remaining in the present—Stanislavski's state of "I am." The ability to do this requires foundational training in which you master the fundamental techniques of entering the creative state, discovering physical actions, developing your powers of observation, exploring circles of attention, incorporating affective memory, and learning the art of creating a real human being behaving truthfully in imaginary circumstances. Through a multitude of exercises, "you" have been pursuing objectives, overcoming obstacles, and using moment-to-moment actions to get what "you" need. The exercises eventually led you to work with actual script scenarios, each of which required you to retain the improvisational nature of great acting. Every step of the way, we have emphasized the importance of *working off* your partner, *really* talking and *really* listening, while genuinely adapting to the ever-changing circumstances in the surrounding environment.

While providing a thorough understanding of Stanislavski's Method of Physical Actions, we have also given you exercises designed to free the emotional life present in each of us. With this end, we hope to have inspired you

to live each onstage moment truthfully as if it were happening for the first time, fully immersed in the world of the play, operating impulsively and spontaneously in response to other actors.

Acting is not about having a great personality or wearing the right clothes. Talent is a prerequisite, but great acting requires training that gives you the dexterity to reveal humanity in response to the given circumstances, humanity that comes from somewhere within you. It is an art of revelation. This book is designed to take you through your first year of serious acting training, which is akin to peeling away the layers of an onion so that all that is left is you and your acting. No one can give you the talent to act, but technique can be developed. Truth onstage is the end result. We hope we have helped prepare you to be ready, willing, and able to allow the unexpected to occur, moment after unanticipated moment.

We have many times referred to Sanford Meisner's maxim on acting, of living life truthfully in imaginary circumstances. The first seven chapters of this book were designed to help you develop a foundational understanding of yourself as an acting instrument. The next four chapters focused on the investigation and intellectual skills required to interpret and effectively analyze scripts. This chapter continues a life-long cultivation of process to develop your way of working through scene study. Duet scene study synthesizes the technique learned in the first eleven chapters. It will help you identify and trust that which is instinctive by making deeply personal choices, understanding the necessity of homework, and creating and implementing a work ethic that is effective in the marketplace. This is the chapter where you develop your "chops" and the confidence that goes with those "chops."

Scene study is a vital part of your training. It helps you develop a process that will enable you to build solid work in a classroom situation that will directly translate to rehearsals and actual productions. It is imperative not only that you learn how to analyze the material, but that you are also able to make choices based on that analysis, giving you options that make the play work clearly and dramatically. That, then, is the purpose of doing scene study.

The levels of preparation differ, but most acting training programs require scene study. Rather than being cast in a production and working with a director, your acting instructor will assign you to a partner. You and your partner will then be required to select your own material (usually a cutting from a full-length play), do your own analysis and research, create a ground plan, gather props and costumes, block, rehearse, and develop your character and scene organically through the integrated technique explored to this point.

There are no rules per se, but the following two sections represent general guidelines for you to consider as you and your partner choose and prepare your scene study for classroom presentation.

## CHOOSING A SCENE

Choosing the right material will be a major factor with regard to the ultimate success or failure of your work, and it is imperative that you work with your partner throughout the selection process. This is a mutual responsibility

requiring both parties to participate fully. Do not assume your partner will have the same taste as you, the same likes, dislikes, prejudices, social and moral standards, and so on. On the other hand, do not let your partner coerce you into doing something you find objectionable, offensive, poorly written, or that simply does not work for you as an actor.

When you mutually consent to a scene, you are agreeing to be truthful to the playwright without censoring words or actions. You have the right to say no during the selection process. However, after you begin rehearsals, your decisions as an actor must be guided by the given circumstances from your character's perspective. Remember, you must never judge your character. You must look at the world of the play through his eyes. Therefore, it is your right and responsibility to speak up at this point in the process. Discuss your options. Make sure your selection works for both parties.

As a general rule, you should avoid lengthy scenes. The average presentation is somewhere between four and six minutes. On the other hand, the extremely short scenes and episodic nature of film and television has heavily influenced the dramatic structure of many contemporary plays. You should avoid episodic plays that require you to piece together two or three short scenes to be done in succession. For scene study, short sequences that have been sewn together by you and your partner almost always lack a logical through-line of action. These types of selections usually appear disjointed and awkward.

You should avoid complicated editing that requires you to remove one or more characters from the scene. If the playwright wrote the scene for three or four characters and you choose to rewrite the scene as a duet, you are not serving the script, and, as with the previous guideline, these types of scenes usually lack continuity.

Your selection should have a rational beginning, middle, and ending. Scenes often begin with an entrance and end with an exit. Whether or not this holds true for your selection, your scene should certainly begin with a new unit, and it will most likely end at the conclusion of that unit or a subsequent one. If you have any questions about how to identify units, reread Chapter 8.

Select material that explores subjects or ideas to which you can relate, something that "turns you on." Although the plot differs from your own life, you must feel a sense of connection with the piece, something that speaks to you as a human being.

Although acting classes offer greater freedom with regard to character types than auditions, your character should still be within your physical and emotional age range. If, for example, both you and your partner are traditional undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 23, you should not select a scene from *'night Mother*, in which one of the characters is elderly. This is doubly true for scenes from *On Golden Pond* or *The Gin Game*.

On the other hand, there are benefits to selecting characters that go against your usual type. Scene study allows you to expand your range. It gives you the opportunity to explore roles outside your normal comfort zone, to create character types in which you are usually not cast in production. Also, acting classes are much more accepting of colorblind



casting and even gender reversal if it will in some way help you grow professionally.

Look for scenes that stretch and challenge you as an actor. Safe material with a comfortable character is *fine*. But with a world of great dramatic literature from which to choose, do you really want to select a scene that is *fine*? The material must present you the actor with an opportunity of failing or of succeeding brilliantly. When you hear your teacher, coach, or classmates say things like “interesting,” “OK,” and “pretty good after it got going,” this means you selected the wrong material. Always remember, “That was nice” is not a compliment.

Great material will simultaneously excite and terrify you. When selecting your scene, make sure your heart races a little. No matter how large or small, great scenes have some element of danger involved—danger of falling in love, danger of quitting “your” job, danger of standing up for what “you” believe, danger of making a decision.

Look for a scene that is vastly important to your character, a scene that reveals a moment of discovery about “yourself,” the other person, or the circumstances that will alter “your” life from this point forward. Perhaps “you” realize that “your” boyfriend has been cheating, or maybe “you” learn that “your” mother has read “your” diary. Perhaps “you” discover that “you” have been falsely accused of something. Possibly, “you” make the decision to leave, to begin your life anew by going another direction.

For scene study based in realism, the bottom line is that you should choose a dynamic scene from a well-written play in which your fully developed character is actively involved in overcoming obstacles to fulfill an immediate objective.

## PREPARING YOUR SCENE

As we’ve said before, read the play, the *whole* play, especially if you choose a scene from a typical duet acting anthology. Read it again and again. Begin taking notes for “your” character autobiography (see Chapter 8). Determine what you believe the playwright wants to convey with both the scene and your character. Establish the overall tone, mood, and tempo-rhythm. Define the simple objectives and the super-objective. Be certain you know the meaning of each word and phrase. Then figure out the best means to truthfully communicate these things to an audience.

With your partner, plan a rehearsal schedule, and stick to it as faithfully as if you were cast in a full-scale production of the same play. At least one rehearsal should be in the actual performance space. Try to have a number of short rehearsals rather than one long rehearsal. This will greatly improve your final presentation. Long rehearsals often result in the “law of diminishing returns” because you may be too tired to work creatively, efficiently, and well. We suggest you limit all scene study rehearsals to no longer than ninety minutes.

Consider that each minute of stage time requires approximately one hour of rehearsal time, depending on the physical and emotional complexities of

the scene. In Equity productions, a two-hour play usually rehearses around 120 hours. Therefore, a six-minute scene will require approximately six hours of rehearsal with your partner. Your private work on “your” character autobiography, unit analysis, and research are not considered in this rehearsal equation.

At the beginning of the first rehearsal with your partner, you must discuss the given circumstances of the scene and play. Together, you must define the world of the play, and you must determine the laws of normalcy. For example, in the world of *Guys and Dolls*, it is perfectly logical and normal for gangsters and other marginal characters to speak in a slightly eloquent manner and break into song and dance while shooting craps in the underground sewers of New York. In Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame*, normal is defined as a world in which only gray exists outside the room containing the ancient lives of Hamm and Clove. They exist in a perpetual loop in which beginnings and endings intertwine. Death lurks around the corner, but it never comes. Things change but remain the same. Even with scripts that more closely reflect our own laws of physics and reality, you must define the world of the play. Talk to each other about your characters, the dialogue, the sequence of actions, the discoveries, all the things privy to both characters. However, do this without getting bogged down in discussion and, more importantly, without divulging your character’s secrets. Remember, it is extremely important to maintain your character’s sense of mystery.

You must then decide upon your ground plan, set pieces, and properties that may affect your physical options as an actor. Avoid pantomiming anything unless it is a convention of the script—as in, for example, *The Fantasticks* and *Our Town*. You need not be concerned with historical accuracy, and there is no call for mere set decoration. However, you must particularize your space by finding appropriate rehearsal props that will stimulate your creativity. Acting blocks along with traditional acting class furniture and props added to items from your own home can create the suitable environment for scene study. Most acting studios provide the following furniture and props:

- |                                   |   |                                 |
|-----------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| • Sofa (small)                    | • Bench (long)                            | • Standing lamp                 |
| • Upholstered chair               | • Bench (short)                           | • Table lamps (2)               |
| • Coffee table                    | • Mobile cabinet (with doors and shelves) | • Television (small)            |
| • End tables (2)                  | • Freestanding doorways (2)               | • Telephones (various)          |
| • Bookcase (small)                | • Double bed                              | • Ashtrays (2)                  |
| • Coat rack                       | • Dresser                                 | • Books and magazines (various) |
| • Dining room table (small round) | • Full-length mirror                      | • Blanket/quilt                 |
| • Dining room chairs (4)          | • Vanity and stool                        | • Dishes and silverware         |
| • Refrigerator (on casters)       | • Acting blocks (12)                      | • Glasses and cups (various)    |
| • Stove (on casters)              | • Throw pillows (various)                 | • Bottles (various)             |
|                                   |   | • Trashcans (2)                 |

Regarding consumable or food props that will affect your physical or mental condition—for example, medicine, hot food or drinks, sour milk, alcohol, or pot—you have learned that you can substitute the qualities of one consumable for another. If your character is drinking alcohol, then drink water or tea. Don't pretend to drink liquid that is not there. You must *do fully* whenever possible. If you choose a scene in which your character is taking an aspirin, then take a tic-tac, substituting the qualities.

Select rehearsal clothing appropriate to the scene. Just as you do with rehearsals for full-scale productions, find clothing from your own closets that will help you with the physical reality of the character. Many actors find it impossible to rehearse without the proper attire. If your character wears a dress in the scene, you should wear a similarly cut dress at every rehearsal. You move differently than you would in pants or shorts. The same holds true of hats and all forms of outerwear, underwear, and footwear. As with scenery and props, historical accuracy is not necessary. However, you should work in clothing that helps define your character's physical gestures and actions. Rehearsing in the appropriate clothing also helps you maintain full



Photo by Kenneth L. Stilson.

### FIGURE 12.1

Kyle VanPool and Jessi Lynn Cochran rehearsing a self-directed scene study from *Twilight of the Gods*. Actors must particularize their space using a combination of acting studio furniture and props along with their own personal belongings. Clothing choices should be suggestive of character, and the particularized space should enhance blocking and inspire creative physical choices.



belief in your actions. If your character is getting dressed, get dressed. You should no more pretend to get dressed or undressed than you should pretend to eat, drink, smoke, open pretend doors, or pantomime anything that causes you to lose confidence in your selected activities.

You certainly must analyze your script and talk about it with your partner; however, you have to translate your discussion into immediate action. Too often, young actors get bogged down in analytical conversation. You should get your scene on its feet as quickly as possible. With regard to blocking a scene, Uta Hagen used to tell the story of legendary producer and director Arthur Hopkins. He described all blocking as “purposeful walking to a specific destination.” Hagen went on to say,

The movement you create must come from carefully selected action which allows for the organic development of the character and the primary action of the scene. Even a trap set for us over and over again by the playwright or the director—“He wanders restlessly”—does not have to lead to the usual cliché of mechanical, tense, and general stage wandering.<sup>1</sup>

To the actor, no movement is aimless. Even wandering has purpose. You must focus each cross on a relevant object to further the character and the story.

Do not try to direct your partner, and never allow your partner to direct you. No matter what your opinion of your partner’s abilities, the process must remain collaborative. Instead, Stanislavski said that it is your job to *infect* your partner. Lift them. Maintain the elements of surprise and spontaneity. Inspire them through your own active choices. Admittedly, this is not an easy thing to do, and it requires a supreme amount of trust on the part of both actors.

With your partner, mutually devise the basic movement patterns by following these steps when initially blocking your scene:

1. Discuss the basic purpose and overall quality of the movement within the scene.
2. Determine the obligatory blocking, what the scene demands—for example, entering, exiting, making a drink, answering the phone, and so on.
3. Sketch in the area blocking by determining what parts of your ground plan you want to use for your scene.
4. Establish the blocking patterns for both characters, which should convey each character’s objectives and tactics while communicating the more basic ideas about the scene. For example, a scene of seduction may begin with the characters far apart and then get closer together as the scene progresses.
5. You may want to block the climax before letting the other moments organize themselves around that sequence, or you may determine the starting and ending, filling in between. Regardless, you should resist the temptation to devise your blocking chronologically, line by line. This may result in poorly organized movement that may get worse as the scene progresses to the climactic moment.



From there, add your own in-depth blocking—your individualized score of physical actions—deciding the details, small movements, and business that will add to the scene or characterization. These details are incredibly important in your attempt to make the scene as truthful as possible.

Every human being has a physical and emotional relationship with every person with whom she comes in contact. As an actor, it is essential that you explore these relationships from the beginning of the rehearsal process. Whether “you” are shaking hands with a new acquaintance, touching “your” brother’s shoulder, brushing “your” daughter’s hair, picking lint off “your” friend’s coat, or hitting a rival in the face, physical contact requires strong internal emotional commitment as well as specific skills and techniques to create an illusion of reality.

Young actors often *pretend* to touch. Rather than *really doing*, they attempt to show us through uncommitted, superficial actions. They hold hands, but it doesn’t communicate as being ingenuous. One actor strokes another’s cheek, but it appears false to the audience. They look into each other’s eyes, but there is no hunger. They kiss, but there is no yearning desire, no truth. Instead, they demonstrate physical contact through false indication. Whether the audience is consciously aware of it or not, they will see through the thin veil of indicated actions every time. Unless there is truth in everything you do onstage, they simply will not believe.

The stage, however, is a secondary reality. Just as there is method involved with sense and emotion memory onstage, you must employ safety technique with all acts of stage combat. You are not *really* going to strike someone in the face any more than you are going to drink real alcohol onstage. Although your character may be out of control of his emotions, the actor must never lose control. You must always apply technique. The character’s intent, however, with all physical contact must be as truthful as the eternal verities of life itself. Plays are written about powerful subject matter, and the physical relationships of characters are often intense. Relationships often involve extensive physical contact motivated by intense emotions. Such physical contact must be completely truthful and with full intent within the secondary reality of life onstage. This is the duality of acting. During every onstage moment, you must fully engage all three circles of attention as discussed in Chapter 6, perhaps playing an out-of-control character while you, the actor, remain in complete control of your physical body. Physical contact, properly handled, adds truth and dimension to your performance. It infects your partner and helps your audience truly believe your actions. Improperly handled stage combat, on the other hand, may cause apprehension in your partner. If an audience ever fears for your safety, they will quickly suspend their belief in the character’s given circumstances over concern for you as a person.

In romantic situations, errors in execution may result in embarrassment—for the performers, the audience, or both. In combative situations, errors in execution may result in serious injury and the subsequent destruction of aesthetic distance. With proper discipline and attitude, however, a mutual trust

can be developed between actors that can ensure comfort and safety. Regardless, physical touch should be discussed, agreed upon, and incorporated into your blocking as early as possible.

Memorize your lines as early in the rehearsal process as possible to free yourself to explore physical choices. Acting teachers have varied opinions with regard to memorization, but the authors of this book believe the longer you hold onto your script, the more limited your options.

After you have determined your detailed blocking, the primary purpose of rehearsals becomes an exploration of tactics. Play with your choices—both physical and verbal. You must free yourself from the script, but don't let memorization hamper creative play. Don't freeze your blocking to such an extent that you become afraid to go away from it when working your scene in rehearsal. Work off your partner and remain in the moment each time you run the scene. Fight for “your” objective. Remain open to new choices, and adapt your tactics in relation to your partner's actions. In this way, rehearsals never become stale or repetitive. The idea of putting it on “automatic pilot” ceases to exist if you learn from your most recent score while remaining open to new breakthroughs at every rehearsal. This is one of the foundations of technique training in rehearsals.

Self-assess your choices immediately after each run-through. You should talk to your partner about what worked and what didn't work. Be objective

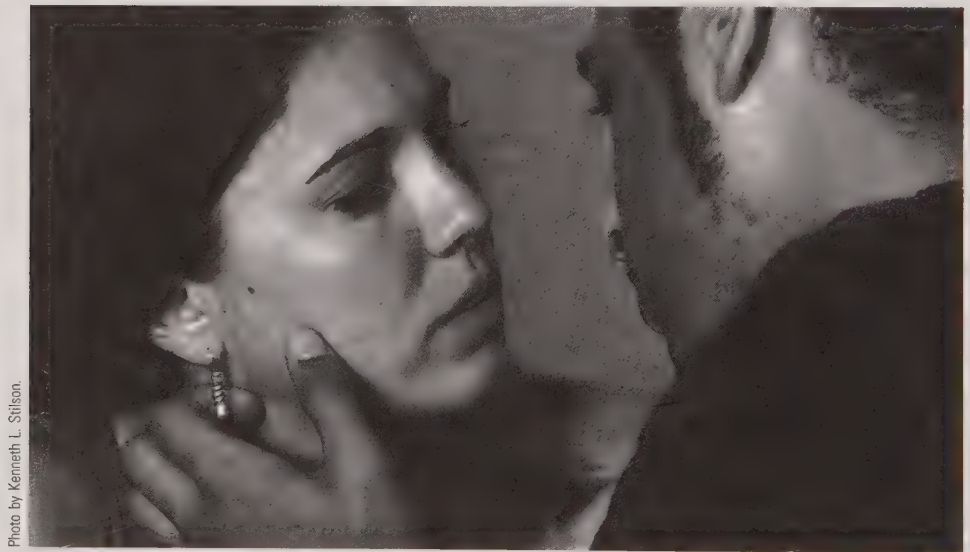


Photo by Kenneth L. Stilson

## FIGURE 12.2

Marianne Miller (*left*) and Blake Russell rehearsing a scene from *Fire Lily*. Scene study synthesizes technique training and requires both partners to work off each other, employing strategy and adapting their tactics at each rehearsal. Following this scene, Ms. Miller and Mr. Russell must objectively assess the verisimilitude of their choices—what worked, what didn't work, and why—and fully commit to their changes the next time they run it.

with your evaluation; otherwise, your artistic output will never evolve. This too is a key component of technique training, to become self-reliant. You must learn to be your own worst (or best) critic, who continually struggles to make your work better.

For each run-through, make definitive decisions about your character. Commit to those decisions 100 percent during the run-through of the scene. Discuss your choices. If one or more of those choices didn't work, make new decisions the next time through, and do those 100 percent. Discuss it again. Make mental notes before doing it again.

Make sure to keep a journal of your process that includes continual updating of "your" autobiography, your research, and daily entries noting all your discoveries, failings, frustrations, victories, observations, and so on. This is not simply an academic exercise. It is an invaluable practice of seasoned professionals.

You should also develop a sense of humor about your own work. It is imperative that you be able to laugh at yourself. If you take yourself too seriously, your partner will be afraid to approach, to speak truthfully, or to disagree. This openness is essential for effective collaboration in the making of theatre.

With the proper amount of quality rehearsals, you and your partner will have the necessary confidence to present your scene to the best of your ability. You will most likely receive immediate feedback from your instructor. You must remain open and objective about your work. Good criticism is constructive. It is not a personal attack, so you should not present a defensive posture. Receiving a critique with the opportunity to discuss your work is a gift. Always remember that in the professional world—particularly in film and television—you will not always be so fortunate as to have an objective outside response to your individual work. At that point in your career, it will fall entirely on your ability to self-assess. Your producer and director will simply expect you to be brilliant. That's why they pay you.

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## EXERCISE 12.1

### SCENE STUDY

After you have been assigned a partner by your instructor, select a four- to six-minute scene to rehearse and present for scene study. You may select a scene from the online appendix, "Scene Study for Undergraduate Actors," or you may choose another script. Make certain the script works well for both you and your partner. Begin with your character autobiography and unit analysis. Plan a rehearsal schedule, and follow the steps described here before presenting it to your instructor for feedback.

# CHAPTER 13

## Getting the Job

*"I think as little of auditions as the actors do ... except that they are necessary under the circumstances of our theatre."*

**Harold Clurman**

Are you worth \$100,000? Or rather, is your talent worth a \$100,000 investment by a producer? According to New York producer, Rance Wright, if you are cast in the ensemble of a Broadway production at minimum Equity scale, that is how much they will be investing in you and your talent. Theatre is a business, and a lot of money rides on their decision to cast you in their production. Successful business people pride themselves on making safe investments that will yield a substantial return on their money. Are you worth investing in?

**Audition.** The word itself sends a shock wave through every actor's body. The audition process is entirely artificial. In many ways, it contradicts the technique training taught in acting classes. True, auditioning is a *form* of acting; however, it is not the same as performing in a play or in film or on television, where you are engulfed in an imaginary world and "working off" your fellow actors. In the audition, there are no props, no set, no costumes. If you are lucky, the audition will take place in a theatre, but more times than not, you audition in an empty studio, hotel room, or conference hall. Auditioning is a necessary evil, and it will continue to plague actors until someone discovers a better way to cast a production.

No matter how great your talent, how extensive your training, how vast your experience—unless you are one of a few exceptions—you must audition to land a role. The actor's first encounter with the director is usually at this nightmarish ordeal. Your experience and training amounts to nothing if you lack the ability to convince the director you are the right person for the job.



Many good actors are not cast simply because they lack appropriate auditioning skills. It is naïve to think that directors and producers should simply have faith in your abilities and trust your résumé in lieu of auditioning. With hundreds of actors vying for the same role, it is a buyer's market. Directors will hire someone they *know* they can trust, and this trust begins with the audition.

You have one opportunity to make a first impression, and your ability to audition with professional competence defines your life and career as an actor. Directors will not hire someone who lacks self-confidence or is intimidated by the audition process. You must present yourself as a working professional. You must be tenacious, removing the concept of rejection from your vocabulary. You must believe in your own talent and experience, and you must seize the moment as it arises.

How do you set yourself apart from others who are equally talented and just as right for the role? How do you present yourself in a positive manner without sounding conceited or obnoxious or loud? You begin by knowing and liking yourself. You must know your strengths and weaknesses—both internal and external. You must be comfortable with your body. Whether you like it or not, you are “selling” your talent and your body, and you must find creative ways to do so.

From the director's point of view, the audition is a simple, time-saving way to become familiar with numerous actors and to attempt to identify those who most closely resemble her concept of the characters in her head. The director uses the audition to find an actor who has the talent and the technique to play a certain role, who physically fits the part, and who will blend well with the other cast members. Of course, if the audition is for a repertory company or a stock company, the directors are also looking for versatility. They are not against you. In fact, they are on your side. They simply want to mount a successful production of the play, and to do so, they need the right actors. They hope you will be “the one” for whom they are searching.

At many auditions, actors may simply be interviewed by the director or asked to present a prepared monologue or scene for the occasion. At some point in most auditions—whether for stage, television, or film—directors require **cold reading** from the script. Often actors receive the scene when they arrive for the audition and have only a short time to look it over.

It has become customary at most **combined auditions** attended by representatives from various companies for actors to present prepared contrasting material. At the Southeastern Theatre Conference Auditions, for example, all student actors must participate in preliminary auditions in late fall, in which a panel of judges select a predetermined number of actors to participate in the combined auditions held in early March. Each actor is allowed only sixty seconds to present one monologue or ninety seconds to present a monologue and a song—and this includes the introduction, transition, and ending. Actors who receive sufficient total numeric scores from the panel of judges are then “passed on” to the primary auditions. While there, actors again present their sixty- or ninety-second prepared audition in front of company representatives

in a large convention ballroom. Acoustics and lighting usually suffer. Following auditions by each group of twenty-five, directors and choreographers then post their **callbacks** in a designated room where actors sign up for timeslots with individual companies. Callbacks are normally conducted in private hotel rooms and are often videotaped. Actors must present their headshots and résumés. A brief but important interview usually follows. Directors then frequently ask actors to again present their initial material, but they often ask to see new prepared material or have actors read from scripts. As many companies must make important casting decisions based solely on these isolated callback auditions, digital and video cameras are common.

In post-graduate professional auditions, however, actors typically audition for one company or a production of a particular play. Most directors have their own system for holding auditions, and an actor should not be alarmed at one who uses unusual methods to determine a performer's suitability for a role. In *A Chorus Line*, a musical about dancers auditioning for a Broadway musical, the "director" asks the dancers to talk about their own lives as well as to dance. Some of the dancers rise to the occasion—others do not.

Before launching directly into the preparation and presentation of the audition, let's take a moment to discuss the business.

## UNDERSTANDING THE BUSINESS OF ACTING

Actors are artists. Many of them do not like to think of theatre as a business. The truth is, without business skills—particularly in the area of marketing—no one will ever see your talent. You may be an artist, but *you* are also a business. You are the CEO, the CFO, and the sole shareholder of "You, Inc." The studio system is dead. An agent or personal manager will only get you so far. You have only yourself on whom to rely. You must take charge of your own affairs. In doing so, you must have a plan—including both short-term and long-term goals. You must know where you hope to be in one year, five years, and ten years. And you must have a well-formed strategy for how you intend to accomplish your goals. You do not have to live in New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles to begin working on your plan. Rather, you must make things happen for "You, Inc." one step at a time, beginning right now from wherever you are currently living.

As the CEO of your company, you must maintain your appearance. This does not mean that you have to present yourself as a conservative business type, but most working actors present themselves as professionals at all times. Think of top actors such as Will Smith, Eddie Murphy, Jennifer Aniston, Leonardo DiCaprio, and Gwyneth Paltrow. They do not have conspicuous body piercing, tattoos, or alternative hairstyles. As beautiful as they are, they present themselves as someone to whom we can all relate. Johnny Depp certainly has a unique style, but he, like other top actors, could be our neighbor, our family, or our friend.

## PRELIMINARY SCREENING AUDITIONS ADJUDICATOR EVALUATION

Overall Score:

Overtime:

(3 points were deducted from raw SCORE)

Type of Audition:

Approved:

Auditionee # \_\_\_\_\_ Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Scoring Scale	Check the appropriate Box	5 - Outstanding: Highest caliber –only minor improvements could be made	4 - Strong: Work of high caliber - some improvement could be made	3 - Proficient: Work is acceptable, but not strong or memorable	2 - Needs Improvement: Significant improvements should be made	1 - Not Acceptable: Requires rethinking/reworking
		5	4	3	2	1

Acting Skills	Character Choices (Grounded & Creative)					
	Strong & Committed Objectives, Obstacles & Use of Fourth Side					
	Emotional Range & Contrast					
Voice Speaking and Singing	Expressiveness & Inner Imagery					
	Breath Support, Resonance, Volume & Articulation					
	Musicality (i.e., pitch, quality, tempo-rhythm, etc.)					
Physicality	Movement & Gestures (Grounded & Creative)					
	Body, Posture & Balance					
	Period & Style					
Presentation	Presence & Command of the Stage					
	Focused & Relaxed					
	Dress, Grooming, Etiquette, & Professionalism					

Recommendation: Acting Only \_\_\_\_\_ Acting & Singing \_\_\_\_\_ Singing Only \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Adj. TOTAL: \_\_\_\_\_

The following does NOT count in your total score, but is rated to let you know if your material works for these Auditions.

Choice of Material	The monologue and/or song present the actor's ability in a good light.					
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General Comments:

Photo by Kenneth L. Silson.

### FIGURE 13.1

Example of Adjudicator's Preliminary Audition Form for large-scale combined auditions.



**FIGURE 13.2**

Broadway choreographer Parker Esse teaches a jazz master class in the Fosse style to a group of students. Whether through dance, stage combat, or athletics, all actors must get in shape and stay in shape throughout their careers.

The best actors also maintain their physiques. You must get in shape and stay in shape. This is particularly true in television and film, where you are either physically fit and considered for **straight parts** or a **character actor** who plays unusual or eccentric individuals. Our profession is not politically correct. Directors *are* looking at your body and how well you communicate with it. They *are* looking at your sexuality. They *are* judging your face, your hair, and your clothing. Therefore, if you want to “make it” in this business, you must maintain your physical appearance.

As a working professional, you should also consider your office supplies and equipment. Agents and casting directors must have immediate access to you twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. You must have the following:

- A cell phone with voice message system that you carry with you at all times. Avoid amusing messages or musical ringtones (e.g., “Please enjoy the music while your party is being reached”). Simple and professional is best.
- Computer and Internet access.
- A professionally constructed and up-to-date personal Web site that includes headshot, résumé, biographical information, reviews, production photographs, and so on.



- An email address that you check several times each day. Again avoid the temptation to create a witty or descriptive address (e.g., iamagreatactor@hotmail.com or funkydancer@yahoo.com). An address that incorporates your stage name and linked to your personal Web site is best.
- A Facebook or Twitter account or a blog spot. Remember, even when you restrict your “friends” on these types of accounts, they are open to public scrutiny. Therefore, steer clear of posting drunken or sexual photos of you and your friends at last weekend’s party, and beware of negative or “catty” commentary. These types of accounts are very useful tools, but inappropriate content may prevent you from getting cast or may haunt you later in your career.
- Something on which to take notes—either electronically or with old-fashioned pen and paper.
- A GPS navigation system on your cell phone or in your car or a map of the city in which you are working and the ability to navigate from it.
- Access to a fax machine.
- A record book and filing system for all items pertaining to your career. Keep your receipts because as a working actor, you are allowed tax breaks on your mileage, industry-related magazine and book purchases, research, educational expenses, and so on.
- A current Internet or hard-copy subscription to various trade magazines and newsletters such as: *Backstage*, *Black Talent News*, *Variety*, *Ross Reports*, *Latino Heat*, *Hollywood Reporter*, *Chicago Connection*, *American Theatre*, and so on.

In other industries, you have a business card, dossier, cover letter, letter of introduction, and a résumé. As an actor you have your **headshot** and **résumé** to certify your professional background. They will not get you the job, but they might get you the audition. A good picture and résumé must create an interest in the eye and mind of the reviewer. The casting director must want to see the person behind the image in the photo and described on the résumé. If these marketing tools do not serve you well, you have done worse than waste your money; you have actually spent hard-earned cash to sabotage your own career. Your headshot and résumé are your *most important* marketing tools. Many times they are your *only* means by which to open the door to an audition that could lead to a job. If either one of these tools is not working for you, it is working against you. If your headshot fails to project your individuality, then you have paid someone a lot of money to obstruct your career. Remember, your picture and résumé are the only items you leave behind after the audition.

With regard to headshots, there are no “rules,” but here are some general guidelines:

- Avoid the temptation to save money by using a friend who dabbles in photography. If your headshot looks cheap, that is the way you will be perceived.
- Hire a professional photographer with experience in shooting headshots.
- Look at portfolios showing examples of the photographer’s work. Ask for references.

- The most basic or classic look is now a **color shot** of the head and shoulders, with the focus on your face. Trends change. Black-and-whites dominated the industry as the accepted norm for more than a century, but with high-quality color reproductions available at low cost, color is here to stay.
- Your picture, whether smiling or serious, *must be alive and project your real personality*.
- Most shots have direct eye contact with the camera, and there needs to be something “going on” in your eyes. Otherwise, your eyes will appear glassy, dead.
- The phrase “make love to the camera” may sound clichéd, but that is exactly what you must do. A commercial look is usually smiling or upbeat, whereas a film look can be more serious. Many actors have two, even three different shots.
- Have a natural look, and avoid using too much makeup. If you are uncomfortable doing your own, often the photographer can recommend a makeup artist.
- Keep it simple. Avoid black-and-white clothing and busy patterns. Bring several shirts with different collars and necklines to the photo shoot.
- If shooting outside, rather than in a studio, avoid distracting backgrounds.
- The classic size remains 8" × 10". These come with various border choices, so check with your agent or colleagues to verify the best choice for your market.
- Have your name with union affiliations embossed on the front of all reproductions.

In short, a casting director wants to see a photograph that really looks like you, not someone on the cover of *Vogue* or *GQ*. Your individuality is what separates you from the crowd, and that individuality should be used and expressed in a professionally produced headshot showing you at your best.

Your résumé should contain the history of your theatrical life. At the most basic level, it should contain personal and descriptive information. It must tell the producer or director about your experience and training and about the people with whom you've worked, the kinds of theatres and productions in your background, and your union affiliations (SAG, AFTRA, AEA), if any. The résumé serves as the chief source of information about you. It should be accurate and arranged in a manner that is easy to comprehend. Here are general guidelines with regard to résumés:

- As a Word document, update your résumé regularly.
- Keep it to a single page. As your résumé's outer dimensions must match your 8" × 10" headshot, your margins should not extend beyond 7" × 9". Staple, glue, or print to the backside of your photograph.
- Specify your union affiliation (SAG, AFTRA, or AEA), if appropriate, directly under your name at the top of the page. If you are a member of the Equity Membership Candidacy (EMC) Program, you may list this.
- Do not list your actual age or the age range you think you play. Why limit the director's vision or creativity?

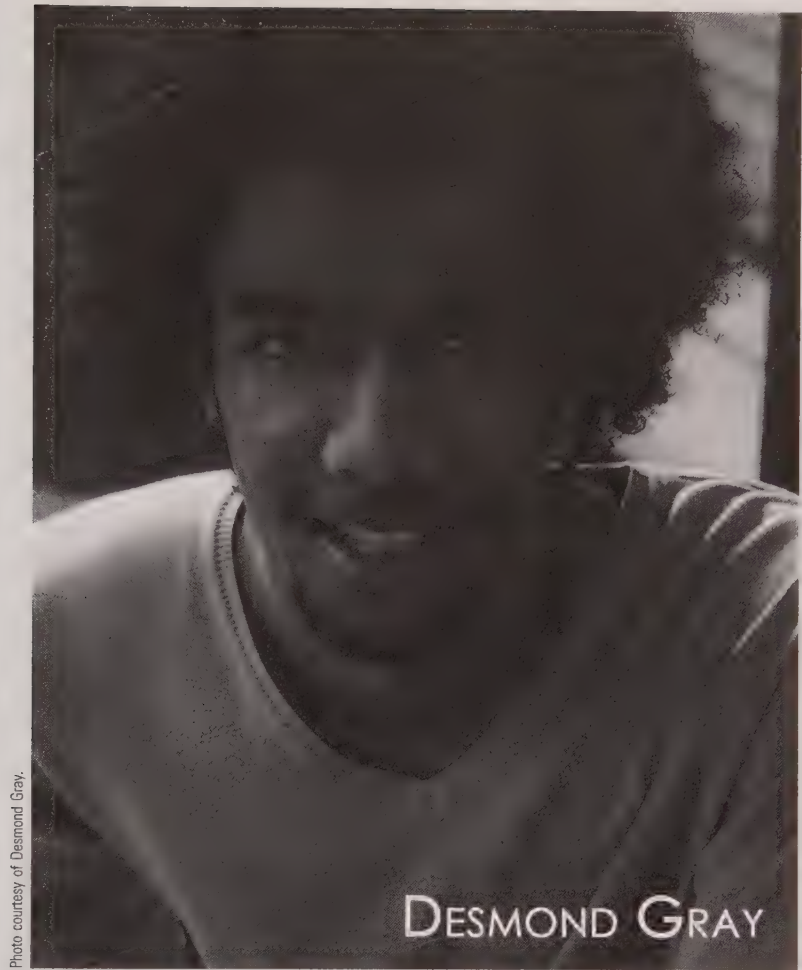


Photo courtesy of Desmond Gray.

**FIGURE 13.3**

Desmond Gray headshot.

- Give the name, address, and telephone number of your agent or manager if you have one. If you do not yet have one representing you, *never* list your physical address. You do not know the people for whom you are auditioning, and you are putting yourself in danger by including this information. Until legal contracts are being drawn, your address is private.
- You certainly want to list your email address, Web site, and cell number. Like your physical address, do not indicate an actual landline telephone number that may lead strangers to your physical location.
- List your most important credits, beginning with your strongest. After you have gained experience, you will begin with your most recent credits.
- When starting out, do not be afraid to list small roles and *bit parts* (even background or “atmosphere” in film or TV, but be sure to specify it as

*extra* work). You can list collegiate and other nonprofessional credits as long as you specify where the work was done.

- Credits should include the title of the piece, the role, and the director and/or producing organization.
- If you do not have any credits, list your classes and workshops. It shows you are committed to the business.
- Be honest. The theatre is a small, close-knit community in which everybody seems to know everyone else. Lying will only get you in trouble. Remember, everybody started once. There is no shame in being a beginner.
- List any special abilities you have: athletic skills, dancing, acrobatics, singing, dialects, foreign languages, musical instruments, magic, and so on. Appraise yourself realistically, and do not put down something you have only done once or twice.
- Be prepared to deliver on your special skills.
- Describe your professional training, educational background, and so on. This is the best place to list your workshops, but keep it selective.
- List your height and hair and eye color, but avoid revealing your weight. Once hired, the costume designer will be the only person who really knows.

Your résumé, like your picture, must give as truthful a view of you as possible. Padded lists of roles you have performed in acting class simply do not fool auditors. Do not be ashamed of who you are. Present yourself with pride.

The following sample résumé was prepared by a recent graduate to use in conjunction with auditions for summer jobs at professional or semiprofessional theatres. Although the needs of producing organizations vary, you should present your training and experience in the best possible light without overstating the case.

If you are participating in a large audition site where many different casting directors will be present, do your homework before the audition. Secure the names and addresses of the theatres in which you have an interest. Send ahead of time your résumé, headshot, and a simple cover letter explaining your background and interest in their company along with your audition number. The following represents a good example of a letter sent to the director before a production of Shakespeare in the Park's *The Tempest* in Ft. Worth, Texas.

Dear Mr. Smith,

I am a second year MFA degree candidate at Columbia University. Training with Andrei Serban, Priscilla Smith, and Anne Bogart has given me the opportunity to study and perform Classic Greek, Spanish Golden Age, Chekhov, and Shakespearean plays. I have heard wonderful things about your company and understand you are producing Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. I would love the opportunity to be called back and to meet with you in person at the Strawhat Auditions next week. I am #103. Enclosed please find my headshot and résumé.

Respectfully,  
Kyle VanPool



# DESMOND GRAY

desgray10@yahoo.com

708-567-6396 (cell)

## EXPERIENCE

*ELTON JOHN'S AND TIM  
RICE'S AIDA*

Ensemble (u/s Radames)

Bailiwick Theatre Chicago,  
American Theater Company

*THE CIVIL WAR*

Frederick Douglass

Stephen Foster Productions

*STEPHEN FOSTER: THE  
MUSICAL*

Ensemble

Stephen Foster Productions

*ANNIE*

Lt. Ward / Ensemble

Stephen Foster Productions

*MILKMEN*

Calvin

Matt Davenport Productions /  
Hershey Park Entertainment

*ROMEO AND JULIET*

Romeo

Southeast MO State University

*BIG RIVER*

Jim

Southeast MO State University

*SWEET CHARITY*

Daddy Brubeck

Southeast MO State University

"PLAY DIRTY" (Original Dance  
choreographed by Jeannie Hill,  
Jump, Rhythm, Jazz Project)

Dancer

Southeast MO State University

"UNTITLED" (Original Dance  
choreographed by Sean Curran  
Dance Company)

Dancer

Southeast MO State University

*RUMORS*

Ken Gorman

Southeast MO State University

## TRAINING

B.F.A. in Acting

Southeast Missouri State University, Cape Girardeau, MO (May 2010)

Acting (4 years):

Kenneth L. Stilson, Robert W. Dillon, Jr.

Voice (3 years):

Judith Farris

Jazz (3 years):

Hilary Peterson

Tap (2 years):

Lees Hummel

Film Acting (1 year);

ActOne Studios, Chicago, IL

Connie Foster

## SPECIAL SKILLS

Directing; Choreography; Armed and Unarmed Stage Combat; Gymnastics (*intermediate*); Juggling;  
Driver's License and Car

Hair: Black

Eyes: Brown

Height: 6'1"

*Directing, Choreography, and Technical Resume on Request*

## FIGURE 13.4

Desmond Gray résumé.

Similarly, you should always send a thank-you note after the audition. You obviously cannot write to every company at a large audition site, but you should send a note to everyone who called you back—particularly if they *do not* cast you. Your note should be handwritten. Emails are not acceptable. The following are good examples of simple, yet effective thank-you notes from that same production.

Dear Mr. Smith,

Thank you so very much for calling me back and interviewing me in Miami last weekend. Your comments proved invaluable, and your production of *The Tempest* sounds exciting. I truly hope to be a part of your company.

Best regards,  
Lindsay Prawitz

Dear Mr. Smith,

Thank you for auditioning me at SETC. Although you have not cast me, I certainly hope you will keep me in mind for next year. I will be performing this summer at the Barn Theatre in August, Michigan.

Sincerely,  
Abby Vatterrott

This is a professional business practice that pays off.

## PREPARING YOUR AUDITION

Whether you are participating in one of the large **cattle-call** auditions or reading for a single role in a play, you need to be ready to present one or more prepared monologues. Selecting this material is simultaneously the most difficult and the most important task you face. No one else can choose your literature. Individual tastes vary greatly. You must pick material for personal and specific reasons. It must speak to you, excite you, and turn you on. In choosing your own material, you take a more active role in your own career. You become an active artist rather than a passive suggestion-taker.

Guidelines and cheap advice about what works and what does not work are plentiful, but because directors vary so greatly in their taste and their needs, no definitive scheme exists. A few suggestions may help:

- Your material represents 90 percent of your time onstage; therefore, select something you like. You will be living with the piece for a considerable period of hard work. Do not add to the drudgery of it by starting with something you hate or about which you feel indifferent.
- Know yourself!
- Use material well within your grasp and understanding. Although “type casting” has developed a bad connotation, all actors should realize the range of roles for which they are best suited. Those roles constitute your

“type.” It is unwise to select an audition piece from material outside this range. A director may eventually cast you for a part that demands a considerable stretch in age and temperament, but you will show yourself best in roles that are close to what you believe to be your best aptitudes.

- Unless the director specifically requests them, avoid dialects because they will needlessly complicate your presentation.
- Try to select material that will not be performed twenty times by other actors at the same audition. You cannot be clairvoyant, but new and alternative material will give you a distinct advantage. When several actors perform the same piece, the director not only tires of hearing it but also has an opportunity that would not otherwise be feasible to make a direct comparison between you and the other actors. Any selection taken directly from a monologue book is overused. Monologue books are good sources to find characters; however, we suggest you locate the full script and select another monologue by the same character.
- Sexually explicit or extremely offensive material can work against you, particularly if it is not based on humor. Although eccentric selections may be attention-getters, remember that your material is a reflection of your taste. Auditors are not necessarily prudish, but in view of the brief time you have to present yourself, it is always best to leave a positive impression.
- Avoid climactic material that requires great depth or intensity of emotion. There simply is not enough time to achieve these emotional peaks effectively and honestly.
- Avoid dull and passive pieces that dwell on character or plot exposition. Sometimes referred to as “remember when” monologues, it is extremely difficult to engage your audience in such a short amount of time with these narrative pieces. Always look for speeches written in the first person that deal with an immediate psychological or emotional problem rather than the telling of a story in past tense with no clearly defined objective.
- Your monologue should be from a well-written piece of literature and involve a character who is pursuing an immediate simple objective while working against an obstacle.
- Nearly anything you select as audition material will need to be “cut” to fit the playing time you are likely to be allotted at the audition. If you are given sixty seconds, your monologue should be no longer than forty-five seconds. If you are given two minutes, prepare ninety seconds. There is no such thing as a monologue that is too short. And actors who exceed an established time limit appear to be undisciplined and unlikely to follow direction.
- Edit for clarity. Selections should be self-explanatory, with a distinct beginning, middle, and ending.

If you are choosing a song, all the preceding guidelines apply, but remember these additional points:

- Although good vocal quality is important, character always comes first. Character colors the voice and humanizes the song. Your song should “show off” your voice, but it also should reveal your acting skills.
- Choose a song that is stylistically similar to the show for which you are auditioning. Obviously, if you are auditioning for *Jersey Boys* or *Memphis*,

you will want to look at rock-and-roll. For *The Light in the Piazza*, more traditional Broadway ballads, pop, or rock are more appropriate. *Ragtime* requires you to consider music of the genre from the early twentieth century. Traditional up-tempo Broadway songs work well for *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*. If you are auditioning for *Big River*, perhaps a country-and-western or folk song would be more appropriate.

- Unless the director specifically requests it, do not audition with a song from the show being cast. However, you should *know* every song from that particular show for the callback.
- Avoid big production numbers and dance numbers. That is a separate audition.
- Avoid narration or story songs, like the old Robert Preston numbers in which his character is “talk-singing.” This will simply project any discomfort you may have with singing.
- No signature songs! Some songs are simply off limits because they have been eternally associated with the original performer. Therefore, unless you want to be compared with Ethel Merman, do not audition with “There’s No Business Like Show Business.”
- Always be prepared to do more than one piece. Particularly in a callback situation, casting directors will inevitably ask to see additional pieces.

All actors should have an **audition portfolio** consisting of a mixture of prepared monologues and songs. Monologues can be found from a variety of sources. Classic, modern, contemporary, and original plays are the most obvious places to find strong monologue material. Avoid using cuttings from published monologue books or Internet sources, as they will probably be overused at large audition sites. These sources are also overwhelmingly comprised of narrative, passive, and reflective material. Monologue books can be useful, however, in discovering new playwrights, scripts, and characters. If you use one of these sources, find a character with which you really connect, then go to the full script and select a different and more active sequence. Regardless, material from traditional scripts should constitute the majority of monologues in your portfolio. However, you may also search nontraditional sources. Listen to talk radio, read books and letters, watch documentaries, and listen to impassioned historical speeches and interviews and statements by people who have accomplished something significant. There are no rules as long as your piece has a clear beginning, middle, and ending and you have a fully developed character living in specific circumstances who is desperately fighting for something while working against psychological obstacles. The majority of music should also come from established, contemporary, and new stage musicals, but you should also look to non-theatrical music from various genres and periods. Your overall portfolio should consist of something like the following:

#### Nine Monologues

- 1:30 modern or contemporary comedic
- 1:30 Shakespearean or classical comedic

#### Nine Songs

- traditional Broadway up-tempo
- traditional Broadway ballad



- 1:30 modern or contemporary dramatic
- 1:30 Shakespearean or classical dramatic
- :45 modern or contemporary comedic
- :45 Shakespearean or classical comedic
- :45 modern or contemporary dramatic
- :45 Shakespearean or classical dramatic
- Shakespearean sonnet
- rhythm and blues
- rock
- rock and roll
- 50s (triplet feel)
- patter song
- classical aria
- country and western or gospel

Over half your Shakespearean or classical monologues should be in verse. You may choose other verse plays, but you should be careful to find good contemporary translations.



Photo by Kenneth L. Stilson.

### FIGURE 13.5

Nervous actors being ushered into the audition room. To expedite the process, groups usually consist of twenty to twenty-five actors, who sit quietly to the side of the accompanist waiting their turn to audition. While the person ahead of him is onstage, the “on-deck” actor stands and moves next to the piano. During the monologue portion of the person ahead of him, the actor may go over his music with the pianist. Following the audition, the actor picks up his sheet music and returns to his seat to quietly deconstruct his ninety seconds onstage.

Even after you have a full complement of monologues and songs in your portfolio, early preparation is an absolute necessity for every audition. You should begin rehearsing your pieces weeks before the actual audition. Do not wait until the last minute! You should consider the following when rehearsing your prepared pieces:

- Study the entire script, and analyze the actions and objectives of the character exactly as you would if you were preparing to perform the role in a production. Think of your audition as a “ninety-second, one-act play, starring you.”
- For the most part, you should not expect to use furniture in your staging. Audition sites sometimes allow you to use a straight-backed chair, but you should be careful not to use it as a “crutch” or as a device to hide behind during your presentation. It can weaken your audition. You should also know that casting directors sitting beyond the second or third row in a large hall would not be able to see you in a seated position.
- Your movement should clarify your simple objective, using a minimum of space—preferably staying within a radius of five to ten feet.
- Employing your use of the fourth side, focus your attention into the house, not in the wings.
- Avoid all gimmicks! Find the character within you, and bring yourself into your work. With that, your work will be alive and fresh. No tricks required.
- No props should be used unless the item is something you might normally wear or carry (i.e., glasses, handkerchief, wristwatch, scarf, or jacket).
- Consider your audience. This is one of the most common responses given by adjudicators on critique sheets. Keep in mind that there are really very few actual monologues in modern drama; rather, they are duologues. Therefore, you must ask yourself, “To whom am ‘I’ speaking?” Are “you” speaking to the audience as a friend, a parent, a psychiatrist, fellow citizens, or “your” enemies? Are “you” speaking to one person? A small group?
- Consider the given circumstances, the moment before, “your” objective, what “you” are working against, how desperately “you” want this, and what “you” are willing to do to get what “you” want.
- Take dynamic risks. Human beings are big. They make big decisions. How many times have you heard someone say, “If you put that onstage, nobody would believe it”? This is nonsense. However, do not confuse risk-taking with indicating—false, unmotivated speech and movement. Risk-taking is synonymous with decision making. Risk-taking can be very subtle indeed, just as it can be extremely overt. As long as you stay within the bounds of truth in imaginary circumstances, you *can* believe your actions.
- Explore the distinct tempo-rhythm of each character in your portfolio. In an audition situation, you are trying to show your range. The greatest actors are “chameleons.” Each character a great actor portrays has a distinct tempo-rhythm that manifests itself through her speech, posture, walk, and gestures.
- Get a coach. Many audition sites such as SETC, CETA, NETC, UPTA, Strawhat, Midwest, and URTA feel so strongly about this issue that the

name of the coach appears next to the actor's name on the audition form to ensure that the actor has had every benefit of proper preparation.\*

- Perhaps most importantly, bring a sense of joy to your onstage work.

## AUDITIONING

After agreeing to an audition, your presence is expected. If you are unable to attend, you must give them sufficient notice, and you must have a good reason for your absence. Your audition begins the moment you walk out your front door. There are many horror stories of actors who have had confrontations with someone on their way to the audition, and that person turned out to be the casting director. Because you probably will not recognize the director, you must be nice to everyone (and we mean *everyone*). This is particularly true after you arrive at the audition check-in, where many times directors wander through the lobby inspecting the talent. You must also arrive at least fifteen minutes early to fill out forms and adjust to your space. Nothing looks more unprofessional than tardiness.



Photo by Kenneth L. Stilson.

**FIGURE 13.6**

Inside a large hotel banquet room with poor acoustics on a makeshift stage, an actor presents her audition to more than one hundred companies.

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\* See online appendix, "Web Links," for audition site listings and contact information.

After you have checked in with the stage manager and filled out the appropriate paperwork, do not leave the audition site without permission. You must also be prepared to stay longer than expected. If you are scheduled to audition at three o'clock, do not schedule to be at work by four. If they request that you stay and you cannot, they will probably excuse you, but it will most likely cost you the job.

As a professional in pursuit of a job, your dress should reflect your professionalism. Consider the following with regard to dress:

- Your clothing should flatter your figure—whatever your body size and type—and expose your unique personality. You are trying to brand your image.
- When participating in combined auditions in which you are auditioning for multiple companies at the same time, actresses may want to consider wearing a dress, since most female characters will be in dresses in most plays written before the 1960s or set before that era.
- Also at combined auditions, no jeans or sloppy clothing. Tyrone Guthrie was fond of saying that people who dress like slobs very nearly always turn out to be slobs.
- When auditioning for *specific* stage, film, or television productions, *you should disregard the previous two pieces of advice* and dress in a manner suggestive of the role for which you are auditioning. Be forewarned. Make your selection subtle so your “costume” will not overpower your performance. However, it is illogical to dress nicely—a professional in pursuit of a job—if you are auditioning for one of the Pewsey clan in Lynn Siefert’s *Coyote Ugly*. If you are auditioning for a Levis® commercial, jeans are a prerequisite. On the other hand, if you are auditioning for Noel Coward’s *Private Lives*, it is illogical for women to wear anything other than elegant dresses and heels or for men to deviate from suits and ties.
- Avoid printed words and busy patterns on clothing, and avoid large, noisy jewelry. These can be major distractions, and they draw focus away from you.
- Wear appropriate footwear. Casting directors *do* look at your feet. No sneakers, flip-flops, sandals, or Birkenstocks. In *Auditioning for the Musical Theatre*, Fred Silver tells the story of a wealthy actor who “thought shoes were so important that he left his fortune to Actors’ Equity Association, to set up a fund to provide shoes for actors so they could make rounds without ever having to look ‘down at the heels.’”
- If you wear a hat, they will assume you are bald. Hats will also create a shadow over the top portion of your face under lights.
- Be careful with glasses because they sometimes cause a glare.
- If you are auditioning at a large cattle-call audition, always wear the same clothing you wore at the initial audition to every callback.

After you have signed in, use your techniques for relaxation to control your nervousness. Remember that relaxation involves both mind and body. You must be able to remove at will any condition that blocks your





Photo by Kenneth L. Siltson

**FIGURE 13.7**

Danielle Hargis adds a touch of humor to her audition. Perhaps more than physical traits, companies look for actors who demonstrate solid training, self-confidence, individuality, and warmth.

intellectual thought process or your ability to command your voice and body to perform at their full range of flexibility. Actors use a variety of methods to achieve total relaxation. For some, yoga or transcendental meditation provides the answer. Others prefer a vigorous routine of physical exercise. Find a method that works for you, and keep in mind that many audition sites provide a warm-up space with a piano.

If at all possible, you should preview the performance space before your audition. This gives you a decided advantage over those walking into the space for the first time. If you are allowed to watch the preceding auditions, you can learn from others' mistakes, and it allows you to become more comfortable in the space.

Be careful not to fall into the trap of being “psyched out” by the other actors. Actors talk while waiting to audition. They love to talk about themselves. Many young actors are intimidated by the “competition.” They find it unbelievable that all these other actors—who are their own ages—have such composure and are such thoroughly experienced professionals. People exaggerate to impress others. Do not accept everything you are told as the truth. Their credits are probably no more impressive than yours, and sometimes

their credentials are simply fabricated. Trust yourself and your abilities. Do not denigrate your own past. You are not in competition with any one single person at the audition. The role is between you and the director. Remember this definition of success: “When preparation meets opportunity.” This is your opportunity; take advantage of it.

If you are singing, carefully and specifically go over your music with the accompanist as you wait in the wings or off to the side. Your music should be clearly marked, and it is your job to establish the tempo. You may tap it out for the pianist ahead of time. Also remember that the pianist will follow your lead during the audition, not the other way around. Your music must be in the correct key. You cannot expect an accompanist to transpose for you on sight. Finally, make sure to “back” or matt your music so it will stand by itself.

Upon entering the acting arena, smile and relax. Directors read a lot into the way an actor enters the stage. Try to control your nerves, and maintain a confident, pleasant, and positive persona. Before your introduction, make physical contact with the space. Place the chair in the appropriate place, even if this means moving it only a few inches. If you do not need the chair, move it out of your way. Find the light. Casting directors cannot understand actors who refuse to act in the light. Also, find your offstage focal points to help you sustain belief in the fourth side. Remember, these focal points should be located in the auditorium (e.g., exit sign, column, door, or any clearly visible inanimate and stationary object).

As you begin to address the casting personnel, rid yourself of all pretenses. *No acting. Be yourself.* Do not apologize. We are not referring to literally saying, “I’m sorry,” but rather apologizing with your gait, your gestures, your eyes, and your vocal inflection. Relax. You are the reason they are there. One of the biggest fallacies is that actors feel that those watching are the competition and want them to fail. Everyone involved in the casting process wants you to succeed. In fact, they will jump for joy if they perceive you to be the next Natalie Portman or Hugh Jackman.

Stand during your introduction. Actors who walk into the space, sit down, and introduce themselves come across as being intimidated by the situation. If a stage manager announces your arrival and mispronounces your name, do not correct her or show irritation. Casting directors will not hire actors who seem to be “prima donnas” or “divas.” Clearly and professionally state your name and number (if necessary). This is perhaps the most important part of your audition. Take a moment. Consider “your” **moment before** and then launch into your first monologue or song. Directors can spot talent within the first ten seconds. If you do not have a strong moment before that thrusts the dramatic action forward, you run the risk of losing your audience—the director. Exercises 13.1 and 13.2 specifically focus on the moment before and the first ten seconds of your prepared audition.

Your transition and exit are also extremely important parts of the audition process. Take your time between pieces. This is a common problem, usually caused by nerves or inadequate preparation, and it breaks the dramatic illusion. After you have completed your prepared material, you may want to



Photo by Kenneth L. Strison.

### FIGURE 13.8

Actors anxiously search for their number on the callback lists. Approximately one-half hour after their group has completed auditions, individual callback lists are posted in the callback room. With their lists complete, actors then go to the various companies' hotel rooms to sign up for individual callbacks, which extend well into the evening.

repeat your name (and number if you have one). This could be the last thing they hear you say as you exit the room. If time is called, do not keep going, even if it is the last sentence or last musical phrase. Simply say, "Thank you," and exit. Do not show frustration with the timekeeper (or the accompanist). You cannot blame him for your lack of preparation. Also, the auditors will sense your frustration, which may cost you a callback. Maintain your composure as you exit. Many casting directors look at the exit as the most important part of auditioning.

Cold readings require a different kind of effort. Most directors would certainly prefer that you not memorize the text, but you certainly may, and should, study the script if it is available before attending the auditions. The director will not expect a fully developed characterization in a cold reading. She will, however, expect you to make decisions about your character—even if they are wrong—and establish a relationship with your reading partner. She will also expect you to perform well under pressure and to show that you can quickly focus on an objective and perform it well enough to bring your words to life.

If you are allowed to hear others read, be wary of the tendency either to copy an effective decision or to try too hard to be different. Another warning:





Photo by Kenneth L. Stilson

**FIGURE 13.9**

A large group of actors stretch prior to dance auditions, which usually take place after the prepared auditions. Following warm-ups, actors are divided into three groups: beginners (actors who can move), intermediate, and advanced, who learn ninety-second combinations of jazz, ballet, and tap.

Do not attempt to guess what the director wants. Center your energies on understanding the script well enough to give an intelligent reading that shows you can make defensible choices. Believing is a part of auditioning, too. You must be able to believe in your abilities and in the words you are speaking.

Use your script in a cold reading, but do not be overly dependent on it. It is a map for your reading and interpretation. Hold it in one hand away from your body to free your ability to gesture. You should also make eye contact with your reading partner—*infect* him. Sometimes you will read with a casting assistant as you speak. Generally, they are not actors and will just “read.” Do not fall into the trap of reading as they do. Trust your own instincts, and deliver a full performance, reading to the best of your ability.

Do not allow yourself to lose control of the reading. Listen to your partner, and react realistically to the situation. In other words, do not “ham it up.” Less is usually better, depending on the material. Even in broad comedy, go only as far as the action and dialogue take you. Do not try to be funny. Simply play your objective, and rely on your technique.

Take your time. Never rush through your reading, unless the script states that the character is talking very fast. Take your moments. If you feel a rising nervous sensation, take a deep breath—never dropping character—and continue. Of course, you will make mistakes. All actors do throughout their



careers. No matter what happens, stay focused. If you get a really bad start on a reading, it is perfectly permissible and entirely professional to say “I’d like to start over, please.” Take a moment and begin again. You will be respected for this kind of command of your reading. After all, this is your time and maybe your only time for this person or production group. If you make multiple mistakes and cannot continue, simply say “Thank you. It was very nice meeting you” and leave. Never apologize! The casting director may not have even noticed your mistake. Often actors are cast in roles when they themselves felt they gave an awful reading.

Be proud of your work, and do not apologize for your presence!

## EXERCISE 13.1

### CREATING A MOMENT BEFORE

When auditioning for a specific production of a previously published play, you must be as familiar with the script as possible. In the competitive environment of professional theatre, the director simply will not seriously consider you at a callback reading if you are not thoroughly familiar with the plot, characters, and dialogue. Some actors will arrive at these auditions completely off-book or “all but memorized.” Many times, however, you will be reading from original material which you have had little or no time to prepare. This is almost always true when auditioning for film and television. The director may or may not wish to furnish any of the given circumstances, or she may choose to give you circumstances outside the actual plot to see if you have the ability to take direction. Regardless of how much information you have about the plot or character, you must have the skill to make definitive choices and supply subtext to unfamiliar dialogue at a callback reading.

This exercise is an excellent way to train actors to create a “moment before” when faced with unfamiliar text. The following quotes have been extracted from the classic to the contemporary, with which you may or may not be familiar. Your instructor will select one of the following *lines*, coupled with one of the *moments before*. As the moments before are completely out of context, do not worry about being true to the original text. Once you have the line and the moment before, you must supply the subtext and manner of delivering the dialogue.

#### Lines:

- Do all human beings ever realize life while they live it?—every, every minute. (*Our Town*)
- Time eases all things. (*Oedipus Rex*)
- I was born on Easter Sunday. The *Titanic* went down the following Thursday. And why? Two *Titanics* can’t exist in the world at one time! When one shows up, the other has to go down! (*The Temperamentals*)

- Death ends a life, but it does not end a relationship. (*I Never Sang for My Father*)
- There are times when you want to spread an alarm, but nothing has happened. (*The View from the Bridge*)
- Democracy reads well but it doesn't act well. (*Misalliance*)
- What is the point of this stupid, painful life if not to be honest? If not to stand up for what one is in the core of one's being? (*The Pride*)
- There are people out there who came here. To be helped. To be helped. So someone would help them. (*Oleana*)
- I know I fib a good deal but when things are important I tell the truth. (*A Streetcar Named Desire*)
- Love is too fragile a sentiment for out here. (*Ruined*)
- Jewels did not make the queen. (*Mary Stuart*)
- Nothing to be done. (*Waiting for Godot*)
- But why should it all be garbage? Why? Why should nickels be bigger than dimes? That's the way it is. (*Speed-the-Plow*)
- Passion can be destroyed by a doctor. It cannot be created. (*Equus*)
- You've got to be taught to be afraid. (*South Pacific*)
- I know you're no worse than most men but I thought you were better. I never saw you as a man. I saw you as my father. (*All My Sons*)
- Cowards die many times before their deaths.... (*Julius Caesar*)
- Every time you meet hatred, stand up against it and that way, it can never happen again. (*Irena's Vow*)
- You're twenty-five. There's so many other things you could do besides this horseshit. (*Farragut North*)
- Love can be had any day! Success is much harder. (*The Chalk Garden*)
- We have seen better days. (*Timon of Athens*)
- You're like a pioneer woman without a frontier. (*Gypsy*)
- You got somebody in you right from the start, and if you're lucky you figure out who it is and you *become* it. (*Occupant*)
- Life is essentially a very large Brillo pad. (*Dead Man's Cell Phone*)
- A very ancient and fish-like smell. (*The Tempest*)
- Alcoholics are mostly disappointed men. (*Come Back, Little Sheba*)
- Contradictions are what people are, bundles of contradictions, fighting them and working them out. (*Grace*)
- Nobody likes the man who brings bad news. (*Antigone*)
- It's television gonna change everything, it's gonna end ignorance and misunderstanding, it's gonna end illiteracy. It's going to end war. (*The Farnsworth Invention*)
- The only difference between a Jew and a Christian is the superstitions to which they subscribe. (*New Jerusalem*)
- Why don't you kill yourself? Why don't you kill yourself? (*Beckett Shorts*)

- So imagine your body's a community, and your cells are the people who live there. The dream of every cell is to be immortal ... to make endless copies of itself, but the community can only use so many liver cells and no more than two eyes, so your cells need to cooperate.... (*The Secret Order*)
- It's remarkable, in fact, that the great majority of great men were also responsible for great carnage in their day. (*Crime and Punishment*)
- Dreams are life's coming attractions. (*A Feminine Ending*)
- What's been set in motion can't be stopped. (*Iphigenia 2.0*)
- Nothing is simple. "Simple's" not even simple anymore. (*In a Dark Dark Place*)
- Barry Champlain is a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there. (*Talk Radio*)
- There are two kinds of people in one's life—people whom one keeps waiting—and the people for whom one waits. (*S. N. Behrman's Biography*)
- History knocks at a thousand gates at every moment, and the gatekeeper is chance. (*Salvage*)
- Years from now, when you talk about this, and you will, be kind. (*Tea and Sympathy*)
- I am a woman who has no place to go, but I'm going.... (*Toys in the Attic*)
- I knew who the surgeon was going to be, so I had fair idea what the operation would look like. (*The Vertical Hour*)
- They say I was born with luck. They didn't say what kind. (*Two Trains Running*)
- Hey, hey, hey, you don't have to do that, you don't have to yell on account of me. (*Moonchildren*)
- I just told you exactly what was going on in my mind. Let's talk about something else. (*Fishing*)
- The thought of kissing you makes my blood run cold but on the other hand, I'm really hoping that you'll pick me. (*Loose Knit*)
- Oh my god. Isn't that the most beautiful thing you've ever seen? (*View of the Dome*)
- You better want to hear about it, because I'm not talking about my book, I'm talking about your life. (*Spike Heels*)
- Oh, don't be afraid! Never be afraid to risk, to risk! (*Beyond Therapy*)
- I wish they'd just leave the whole subject alone! (*Gigi*)
- Well maybe I was wrong, but let's not waste time arguing about that now. (*Family Portrait*)

#### **Moment Before:**

- You got a speeding ticket.
- You found out you have cancer.
- You told your boyfriend or girlfriend you loved them.

- You lost your keys.
- Your car was stolen.
- You had a fight with your best friend.
- You spoke to your parents for the first time in two years.
- You got lost on your way here.
- Your alarm clock didn't go off, and you arrived late.
- Your computer crashed and nothing had been saved.
- You found out you (or your girlfriend) is pregnant.
- You won the lottery.
- You accomplished your unattainable dream.
- You lost your ATM or CC card.
- You totaled your parents' car.
- You bought a new BMW.
- You got married.
- You broke up with your boyfriend or girlfriend.
- You have been stuck in an elevator for the last hour.
- You had the most amazing dinner.
- You bought a new pet.
- You found out a family member has passed away.
- You found out you have become an aunt or uncle.
- You were told you have one week to live.
- You discover you made the dean's list.
- Your favorite TV show has been canceled.
- You greeted your favorite actor or actress, and they said hi back.
- You found out magic is real.
- Your house burned down.
- You won an exotic vacation.
- You found out the medical biopsies were negative.
- You heard your boyfriend (or girlfriend) has cheated on you.
- You were found guilty of a crime and sentenced to a year in prison.
- You were acquitted.
- You were cast in a Broadway show.
- You accidentally killed someone.
- You discovered your own adoption papers.
- You saw the best movie ever.
- You got a flat tire.
- You haven't slept in two days.
- You came back from your dream vacation.
- The person you love told you they loved you.
- You got a full body and hair makeover.
- You failed your final.
- You had a fight with your parents.
- Any other moment before supplied by the class or your instructor.



## EXERCISE 13.2

## LAUGHING AT THE TOP

Even after supplying a moment before, many actors have trouble launching into their pieces with any real sense of intrigue. Remember, the best actors create new human beings who are surrounded by mystery. They have secrets, and we (the audience) want to know what those secrets are. Mystery and secrets force the audience to listen. It makes them lean forward in the chairs to watch your behavior.

Here is a simple exercise you can employ during the rehearsal process that will have dramatic positive effects during actual auditions. Laugh your way into your piece. Return to Exercise 13.1, selecting a line and a moment before. Just before you deliver the first line, laugh. Laughing at the top of your piece is an amazing way to lift the opening ten seconds of your audition out of a vacuum. It will help communicate the moment before, making “your” world more specific and giving “you” a secret.

Of course, laughing is not logical for every moment before, but something (anything) must propel “you” to say “your” first words. Repeat this same exercise, only this time between “your” moment before and “your” lines:

- scream (or yell)
- sigh
- spit
- mess up “your” hair
- stomp “your” foot
- wave
- wipe tears from “your” eyes
- scratch your head (or armpit or rear end)
- cough
- make a silly face
- any action that is a reaction to external or internal stimuli (i.e., your moment before)

Now do the same exercise, only this time launch into your piece with a *moment of silence*, focusing on something located **down center** with help from your fourth side. For example, look at the sunset, the moonlight, a car pulling into “your” driveway, a puppy playing in the yard, the rain, and so on. Perhaps “you” just had a fight with “your” girlfriend at the prom, and she is walking away after screaming something hurtful. Her words and actions leave “you” breathless. Watch her for a moment. Notice the judgmental eyes of your friends on the dance floor. Then compose “yourself” by brushing off “your” lapels before stepping forward and speaking.

Any verbal or physical action will help you launch into your monologue as long as it stems from a specific impulse that has just occurred seconds before you react.

**EXERCISE 13.3****CONSTRUCTING YOUR PORTFOLIO**

- A. Using what you've learned so far, begin working on your portfolio. Find monologues and songs you believe would serve you well as audition pieces.
- B. Prepare and perform in class a three-minute audition (nonsinging) containing two pieces—one comic and one serious; choose one from a classic play and one from a modern play.
- C. Prepare and submit a hard copy of your résumé.
- D. Research the professional photographers in your area who specialize in theatre, film, and television headshots. Peruse their portfolios and compare prices. Schedule an appointment for a photo shoot. When complete, submit a copy along with your résumé.
- E. Research and develop a professional and creative personal Web site that includes various headshots and body shots, an up-to-date résumé, biographical information, production photos, video clips, reviews, and so on.
- F. Investigate your local or regional audition scene. Find publications and hotlines that will inform you of upcoming events.
- G. Research and make an appointment with a reputable talent agent for commercial work.
- H. Investigate the combined audition sites listed in the online appendix, "Theatre Web Links." Plan to attend one or more of these auditions.

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8. David Gardner, *Tom Hanks* (London, England: Blake Publishing, Ltd., 1999), 97.
9. Barbara Kramer, *Tom Hanks* (Berkeley Heights, NJ: Enslow Publishers, Inc., 2001), 47, 71.
10. Marlon Brando, with Robert Lindsey, *Brando: Songs My Mother Taught Me* (New York: Random House, 1994), 411–417.
11. Steve Martin, *Picasso at the Lapin Agile* (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1996), 33–37.
12. Magarshack, “Introductory Essay,” 37–39.

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2. Constantin Stanislavski, *Stanislavski’s Legacy*, ed. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1958), 174.
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2. Joseph Slowik, "An Actor's Enemies," paper delivered to the Mid-America Theatre Conference, Omaha, Nebraska, March 16, 1984.
3. Ibid., 6.

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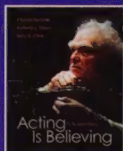
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STUDENT COPY ISBN:  
978-0-495-89807-8

ISBN-13: 978-1-111-35139-7  
ISBN-10: 1-111-35139-2